

P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Mike Land (Philadelphia, USA): "Drank"

His deep-set eyes fell on so many businessmen and students rushing through the crowded sidewalk to arrive at just another meeting or classroom, any space cooler than the sweat drenched concrete of a Philadelphia summer. The blistering sun was getting to Garrett, even as he sat in the air-conditioned café. The tepid musk floating inside those walls was reminder enough.

His hours spent amidst the tan walls and hipster do-nothing regulars were meant to normalize him. To keep him distant from the knowledge he was doing nothing with his life. None of them could understand the funk their armpits and unwashed clothes could bring on Garrett. He looked back to the unforgiving pavement, and the remorseless feet that stomped along it. They were all the same, he thought. None of them could change, and none of them had any idea they weren't going to.

Garrett climbed from the table to leave with a last look through the dried film on the window. He saw the father first. A man, who at twenty, looked as though he'd already seen a thousand different kinds of pain, and each one he brought upon himself. He wore tattoos like they were clothes, his arms and neck covered in the different color dye, deflecting a shame he knew was his. His painted hand held the tiny palm of a girl's not older than ten.

She struggled to keep up. His hurry barely noticed when her beaten up Reebok caught a crack in the sidewalk, and she had to use that uninterested, decorated hand to keep her balance. A balance the man did his best to forget. One that was hers to make behind him. She found it entering Sami's swinging door.

Garrett watched as the pair made their way to the counter. He tried to remain discreet as he watched them, opening the book he carried in for appearances. The man couldn't have cared less, didn't notice Garrett was alive. The girl though, in the midst of being dragged, witnessed Garrett's interest. Her hand in someone else's, she would have waved had it been free.

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"Do you want something?" The man asked looking down.

She nodded her head and smiled a grin free from understanding. Garrett wondered if it was intrinsic. If she, like her father, had the inclination toward deluding self-destruction. If she had the type of numbing narcissism her father most obviously had. He guessed that she did; it was a symptom of the cafe.

"Peach, please," she said, motioning toward the house of iced-teas behind the counter. He fished two crumpled dollars from his dirty jeans and handed them to the Mohawk-clad cashier, braless and pierced like a pin-cushion.

"Look, I need to make a call." He said to the cashier. "Could you watch her while I use the payphone?"

She shrugged and turned to replace a dirty pot of coffee with a clean one.

The man made his way downstairs without a word to the girl. She had a seat at the empty table next to Garrett's. Content with her iced-tea, she shook it up and twisted the cap until its seal popped. She took a casual sip, blending in well with the patrons around her.

Garrett suddenly remembered that children made him very uncomfortable. He didn't know what to do around them, never had, even as a child himself. He figured it best to ignore them, to focus on anything but their tactless manner of dealing with others. But this girl didn't seem anything like that. She couldn't have been younger than Garrett's impression of 'child' but about her there was nothing insulting. She seemed sincere, and she gazed out the filmy window just like Garrett had when he spotted her.

He kept himself from glancing at the girl, requiring every bit of restraint within him. Had she been the normal fare inside of Sami's, he would have been content saying nothing. To the little girl's credit, she could very well have been. A bit taller, with hips and breasts wider, Garrett could have assumed her rent was late, that she'd called out of work because of a hangover, and somewhere on her body a tattoo was waiting to be revealed after a six pack of Pabst and as many shots of Jameson. She had the mentality, it was waiting for cultivation. This was what drove the compulsion for Garrett to tell her to try business school; this life she's so well suited for is one of circles. How he wanted to tell her the distant, uncaring man she came in with was a result of this life - of drug-addled insignificance and fantasy indulgences without real intent or substance. Then again, Garrett guessed this girl loved him unconditionally, and no amount of truthful observation could change her mind. He only wanted to tell her the iced-tea would be better enjoyed on a picnic with another lawyer, anywhere but within those deaf, unsympathetic walls.

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Instead, he kept his nose in the book and read the same sentence for the fifth time.

‘Let be what cannot go undecided.’

The man she’d entered with leapt up the stairs leading from the bathrooms and payphone. He’d grown squirrelly in the past five minutes and hurried toward the little girl. Squatting to put her at eye-level, he smiled and took her hands in his own.

“Listen, baby-girl.” He said. “I’ve gotta go for a little bit, but I’ll be back. Daddy needs some help right now. Just wait here.”

She did her best to keep a wrinkled frown at bay, but there it was below a shaking lip.

“How long?”

“I promise not long. Just wait here.”

The man rose to his feet. He caught the glare Garrett leveled from the corner of his eye. He snarled at the sympathy and strode from the café. Garrett watched through the window as the man hailed a cab quickly, jumped in, and peeled off down the street.

The little girl’s happy fixation on the window had evaporated. Now she looked only at the bottle in front of her, and the stained mosaic table that supported it. She was trying to keep the emotions inside, the unbelievable feeling of abandonment, the terror he might never come back.

Garrett could smell the shame on her shoulders. Through the funk of armpits and unwashed clothes, he didn’t need to look to see her emotion.

© Mike Land 2005

Adam Field (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania): PICC (A Poet in Center City) #48

The map of John Rind’s brain: as I’ve said, complicated. As I got to know John, I sifted through the history he gave me. If I couldn’t figure him out completely, I could at least give it the old college try. Raised, with Kyra and Ari, in an itinerant way, by a card-shark father and a therapist mother. At a certain point, the Rinds were settled in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, right outside State College. They were there, it turns

out, part of the time I was in State College, too. John never forgot seeing me around with Jena Strayner, while that was going on. The Rind kids received little conventional schooling. What they did receive was a thorough grounding in the rigors of psychology, psychoanalysis, and the therapeutic process. That was on one side. But the other side, which was also internalized, encompassed casino rackets, betting circles, fantasy sports hi-jinx, and what it meant to keep lines running in all directions. So, as he stood at the end of the long, winding way which led to the Highwire's entrance, John himself was introspective about his complete immersion in outward reality. That inward sense of separation, of being yanked violently in two different directions at once, gave him a physiological quirk of feeling compelled to express himself from a deeper place than most, even in the middle of so many lines running that P.F.S. briefly towered over Atlantic City: "Um, can we end what's going on in the factory space, please?" "Are the Temple kids done?" "Just about. By the way, thanks, seriously, for taking care of the coat room thing. I got sick of answering questions. After the next two acts, we can fly free for the rest of the night, right?" "Yup. I'll take care of the Temple kids." "I'm lobbying for a fifteen minute break." "Go right ahead." "No, I'll wait for you, dude. I've got a roach. Tonight's one to celebrate." We were both lanky, me at dead-even, zero-sum-game 5'9, John up there at 6'3. "Right on." Yet that John edge, of meaning it, in a general sense, more than most, had just a hint of desperation in it. At moments like this, I never forgot that John's earlier life scored an 8 out of 10 on the trauma meter. Not many years before he joined up with us, John was forced to endure the murder of Ari Rind, on the college campus of the school Ari was attending. Ari's murder, by all accounts, was an act of the most senseless violence. He was brutally beaten to death, for the sin of standing up to a group of thugs picking on a younger kid. When John was panicked, both strands of his personality— the introspective devotee of all forms of analysis, and the burgeoning card-shark following in the footsteps of his father, who, as is crucial, also died, this time from a heart attack, at around the same time as Ari, leaving an equal, irremediable gash— collapsed into one basic stance before the world. John saw himself as a fireball, a dynamo. He was going into the world to do everything he wanted, all at once, and he would brook no interference. With the corpses of his brother and his father behind him, he'd make one bold lunge at eternal life, and, as for the rest, que sera sera. I caught up with John on the Gilbert Building steps. Cherry Street at night tended to be free of cops. "You got that roach?" "Yup." "We made money tonight. We can count it up and divide it with Jim when we go in. Did you see Lena?" "Yeah. She did an Oompa Loompa routine with me, but we're going out some time this week." "You having fun?" "Yeah. But remember— you get to go home soon. I don't." "Is Adelphia House locking you out?" He smiled and shook his head. It was always like that with John. Despite being several years younger than me, there was worldly business sense, of the dark variety

or stripe, in John's brain, which put John ahead of me slightly in the race-to-understand-the-world. Penn be damned. I knew that then, too. And did my own introspective routine about tragedy burning real, tactile understanding into the human brain. Roach done, up we went.

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Becky Hilliker (Boston, USA): "Catch"

The wind turns the water into an animal
& the boat rides the back of swells,
bucking wetly.

My legs absorb the push & pull,
thinking only of the fish,
sleek & dripping on the line,
neon green parachute ballooning
from its mouth.

I arch my back
& the rod dives.

The fish lifts, slimy as an egg,
spinning like a ballerina
on a silver thread,
its marble eye mute,
fixed on white.

How many times have you watched this world,
blinded, terrified?

There are hands on you
& pliers in your mouth,
metallic, blood-washed.

How many times have you waited
for the water
while everything lurches around you,
brilliant white, like the inside
of a hospital, like the underbelly
of a dream, gasping
to break the surface

toward that cold & sudden light?

© Becky Hilliker 2005

Noah Eli Gordon (Colorado, USA): "Sonnet with a Question & Answer"

Is it possible to make a poem
By elucidating another poet's method?
Say Eric Baus' new prose piece
"The Scarlet Phoneme,"
Which is, itself, an echo
Of his poem "The Scarlet Phone."
For the former of the two
He's been connecting bits of e-mail spam
That escape his filtering program
By including text from novels within
The public domain & reworking
The syntax & nouns as to resemble
His interest in a heightened pictorial gesture.
The answer is yes.

© Noah Eli Gordon 2005

Mike Land (Philadelphia, USA): "Step: Ronnie"

For all intents and purpose, Ronnie had been a bum his entire life. He was a man without the shiest of wants or needs. A man that could go for days without food or a clean crap and still thank those unfeeling city-dwellers that snarled at his proposition for unwarranted help. He was a happy guy, Ronald was; despite cutting off his nose to save his face. He knew a level of freedom no one can understand lest they've ever looked at the homeless with a scrap of envy. That freedom though, wasn't what made for his happy demeanor; it was something far simpler.

The trick to living homeless, he told me once, was to find any passing joy and hang on to it with every thread of dignity one can muster. His certification of life came from the ease in which he derived pleasure from eating only semi-moldy garbage. If the lettuce hadn't gone entirely tawny, Ronnie would become the happiest of campers. And that's how he got through his days. That's how he could so easily refuse the amenities that make up a life as a part of society. As a result, Ronnie was

able to make up his own society, full with standards and borders, a world dictated by only a few but steadfast rules. One such rule - the most important rule - was force your glee at every turn.

It's not to say this was always easy for good Ronnie. A bum is still a bum, regardless of proposed demeanor; and most generally, a bum is pretty corrupt with revulsion by nature. Still, Ronnie found his grace when he looked for it. Those that he considered friendly were the ones to point out his shoes were what made his search for temporary satiation plausible. He'd had them for ten years and there was barely a scratch on them. The train yard bums called them magic and respected Ronnie for wearing them. Those more cynical homeless believed he'd been trading them up for months. The black leather was as deep and robust as the day he first held them in his hands.

A man with white hair and brown skin stopped in front of the then newly dispossessed Ronnie and asked if he had the skill enough to shine a pair of shoes. Ronnie nodded without a word. The brown man looked down at Ronnie, who at the time was wearing bundles of newspapers for footwear and asked if he needed them. Ronnie denied the offer, claiming since his fall, he needed nothing. The brown man smiled and left his shoes in the hands of the given up. Maybe there was magic in them, perhaps it was a karmic redistribution, but those shoes to Ronnie made his search for any chance of truth in life worth continuing.

It was when those shoes were stolen from his feet that Ronnie's search for dispensation took on a different ideal entirely. A group of those more unsavory homeless types had banded together for the sole purpose of removing Ronnie's grace. And after they were taken, he slowly collapsed into the man he was before his fall; he became needy, desperate for the absolution that had come so easily with the knowledge of an overall unimportance. Without the ace in his shoes, unimportance turned into anguish and his positive world view had steadily crumbled. He was left with the truth of his part in a meaningless society.

So he wandered. Shoeless and adrift, he pursued what could not be captured any longer. His heart was enamored with what was passing, yet he realized what passed by was something he could never truly possess. As each chance for renewal escaped his grasp he'd become more and more aware of his own lack of having. He was made aware of what a bum he'd become.

Ronnie lived on, somehow. On Fridays he'd beg for Fifty cents to empty the Inquirer's Twenty-Second Street point. If a good movie was opening that weekend, Ronnie could earn quarters enough for a real meal; as real as Wendy's or McDonald's, anyway. But he hadn't in weeks. He wouldn't sell the papers lifted from the corner anymore; just wrap them around his feet, swollen from the chilly air. He didn't think

much about the fact he was stealing them from their distributor, or that he could have used the Citypaper for free. He took what he did for his wants and regarded nothing else with importance. Change within him had occurred; now there were unbreakable standards to which he had no chance of avoiding. Before, Ronnie knew purposelessness, now he was a waste. Even as a bum, Ronnie was faced with those exchangeable alternatives that crush a man's spirit, and cause for starvation's reminder.

He hadn't eaten in a week and by then, a week was a month. All that came to pass as truth for Ronnie was that the hungrier he got, the less likely it became that he would eat. Falling deeper and deeper into his hunger was all he could do, besides decay. He'd try sometimes to read the news on his feet, but he'd almost forgotten how, or was just too hungry to do so. He thought of his hunger. It was consuming him, bit by bit. He began thinking about how to rob the man walking down the street wearing glasses and a Nancy scarf in March. There was no strength left in Ronnie to pull him into an alleyway; or even to swing a lead pipe. Maybe he could manage the ten-year old girl walking home from Grade school. Then again, he doubted if she had anything on her to begin with.

If you're hungry enough, you'll do just about anything to eat. You find the push to get up for food. Without energy, Ronnie gathered his final ounces of strength to sell one last stack of papers before what otherwise would surely have been death. He would settle for anything, a bag of peanuts, a hot dog, something to chew and swallow. He trekked the ten blocks to Twenty-Second where he often made his pickup, fingering the two quarters in his pocket. Pushing himself to the point, he thought, was just the beginning. It would be a while still of carrying the papers before any profit could be turned, and that ache made him walk faster.

As he approached the corner he saw a woman with dark sunglasses holding a long stick. At first her look was lost, but it became clear she was waiting for something. She blocked Ronnie's access to the papers. "Would you buy a paper?" He asked, swallowing his words as he spoke them. "How did you know?" The woman asked. "I need change for my dollar." She rubbed her cane against his paper shoes. "Could you help me?" She pointed her head upward toward the sky, focused in her darkness. "Please," she said and held out a Ten dollar bill. Ronnie took into account her helpless and trusting place. His stomach made him take a paper from the machine and hand it to the woman. "Keep the fifty cents," she said. "A paper's worth a dollar any day." Ronnie looked at her a moment, and looked at the Ten she was holding out, mistaken for a single. "Are you blind, Ma'am?" "No, I carry this stick for fashion; it's the latest trend from Italy. Take a guess, smart guy." And carrying the paper under her arm, she walked away. Ronnie looked at the ten dollar bill he had just taken and was able to think of only one thing.

For a man with newspaper footwear to walk into the Arch St. McDonald's is not entirely uncommon; the place had seen its fair share of scum in front and behind the registers. Ronnie though, was one of the few to walk in with money in his pocket, albeit appropriated money. He strode to the counter with the truth of life within his reach. Here he remembered what it was like to be content with what was occurring. No longer minding the sores around his feet, the ache in his belly, the hardship on his mind, he ordered food like a man with an honest intent and responsible plea. He asked for two Double Quarter Pounder meals. He was given a pound of beef next to three potato's fries and a gallon of Coke, not the healthiest way to break a fast.

He inhaled the meal. Tasting nothing but the long-awaited sustenance, he smiled at others in the restaurant as he ate. People avoided his looks. They glanced over at the bundles he would walk on, but made sure the bum could not ruin their meal. It didn't bother Ronnie. His anger had receded and he was left to enjoy how the day was turning out. He recalled the blind woman, and the off-chance timing of catching a free ten dollar bill. Maybe it was greed, he thought, maybe one should feel bad. But he didn't. He didn't feel anything except for the meat, sliding down his throat, half-chewed and overcooked.

When done, he sat on the hard plastic of an upstairs dining room chair at McDonalds, shifting for a more comfortable position. He told himself he wasn't going anywhere, not until that food had been digested, but there were troubles. Remembering back to the night when his shoes were stolen, he began to tremble with anxiety. Those faces that belonged to the arms holding him down, the smiling mouths of remorseless thieves, it stuck out it in his head like never before. Unable to shake their malice he began to tremble, grappling with the shooting pains bursting in his belly. Something was coming, and Ronnie knew not how to deal with it. All his life it was his lot to abstain from finding an answer to a problem. Never needing a solution was his key to avoiding any hindrance. But now, his stomach insisted on showing him solutions are inevitable. It showed him what it's like to be folded on top of itself so many times its density could pop. And pop Ronnie did, all over the floor of the upstairs dining room at the McDonald's on Arch. He tried popping in the bag his food came in, but failed after focusing on the chunks. He could see the onion and the mustard, the pickle and the ketchup, it kept coming and coming; not barely a quarter digested. He lurched as little as possible but landed face up on the floor dry heaving out of the side of his mouth what was left to be expelled. His knotty hair smeared the reddish remains of a stolen meal into the linoleum floor as he cried out loud, begging for something he never wanted in the first place. Finally, he had adapted the thief's mindset and aided in the proof of that single societal truth; nobody's different at zero.

P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Adam Fiedel (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania): *Equations: Thesis: #17*

Editor:

- Adam Fiedel

The ecstasy levels built into my time with Kathy were dead-ended, also, by being too unreliable, too jumpy. It's just that at first Kathy & I didn't notice. I was let loose of Artist Posts the bondage with and to Cheltenham High School; Kathy had been more or less happy at North Penn. Yet, here we were in State College, ready to do what was incumbent upon us to do. Kathy, a stout blonde who alternated between jubilation and self-abnegating catatonia, had met me on the North Halls basketball courts one night while a party rocked the place. We improvised a routine and a place: down Zeppelins: The Tra... into the piano room in the Runkle basement. We took each other's virginity eagerly, avidly, without really noticing, and the meat of the matter was just adventure., passing the time, more adventure. I dealt with Kathy's self-abusive moods by playing Pogorelov therapist, to the extent that I could, and the semester swung around us. My roommate gone, we pushed the two beds in my dorm room together to continue our investigations. The sex itself was clumsy, yet strangely clean of transgression; like a Blackbirds ... couple of kids using a see-saw or on a calliope. There was a place we couldn't go about depth and a bridge we couldn't cross into the richer straits of passion. She bit, Andrew Lundwall (Rockford, Illinois, my neck and left a purple bruise. The girls in my classes laughed at me, but I was a USA): from Ga... taken in young man. It's just that Kathy was somewhere else. Her real life remained in Lansdale, and she knew it. And with her camera, which she used with great acumen. I was at least noteworthy, other than for having taken her virginity (and she mine), for being a good photo subject, with my wild hair, baby face, and ragamuffin habits. We were preoccupied away from each other, and the feeling I later had with Jena, that presence, was missing. All of which was present in us as we distractedly banged away at each other.

• Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA): from Map of...

• Adam Fiedel (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania...)

• Chris McCabe (London, UK): from downZeppelins: The Tra...

• P.F.S. Reading Habits

• Derelict Part 2: Siren's Silence

• Preface: Derelict (1997): Vladlen

• Adam Fiedel (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania...)

• Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA): from Blackbirds ...

• Vlad Pogorelov (Rocklin, California, USA): from De...

• Andrew Lundwall (Rockford, Illinois, my neck and left a purple bruise. The girls in my classes laughed at me, but I was a USA): from Ga...

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Andrew Lundwall (Rockford, Illinois, USA): Three Prose Poems

hey. i'm going all metal dark fingers. since the colour of want speaking. everything December 2007 January 2008 February 2008 March 2008 April 2008 May 2008 June hurts. be treated like have affairs laughing hysterically. signs of it's time like chronic 2008 July 2008 October 2008 November between heels. these mysteries. things aren't perfect are inflatable. it doesn't 2008 December 2008 February 2009 March matter i missed you mouth confesses. images creak with strange eyes with strange 2009 April 2009 May 2009 December 2009 energy. chronic proportions who love use me. have someplace going midnight like February 2017 June 2017 April 2020 May crusades. messed in take a breather. a strange girlfriend is eager. & you have a song 2020 July 2020 September 2020 October is addictive. equals yes. to be crystal with three-fourths it's told. everything worry 2020 February 2021 March 2021 June 2021 when the way it means avoid the vertigos. chances are still need the spiritual August 2023 September 2023 October 2023 heartaches. palace of mouth to hers. to hers makes phantoms. finds skin she's in. November 2023 December 2023 January 2024 harbored & how. technicolor fingers. a strange position yes with gin. stained. May 2024 June 2024 laughing. she's all like slow down time together. you opened herself. images all insane with want. with a power. give thanks. parted sweet. lips are hurts. are her lips everything wants sin.

tongue-sprawling shadows. funky as sin. is addictive. makes like scattered yes. toxins. disorganized sweet words. planet things non-stop. get eyes. know. we crazy bitter submitted. magic triad. tourism of fantasized edges. raptures. mysteries accumulate. fetishistic refreshments. more vertigo. voice transformation through inflatable static. want me. despair have someplace. moves so noise towards breath. being shards sighs. to occur exposed the spiritual proportion. trances prosthetic. desensitized whatever. loved three-fourths abstraction. are understand instincts. sky creaks with it loaded apprehensive. paralytic leap-frog. chronic between heels. being strange ministry. being unfathomable. beautiful energy bulges. the metal dark is wolves. descending like repercussions.

tone of vertiginous surprise. gave X away. phantom eyes cloudy with gin. stained. fingers. be better guilty palace of presence. static between medusas. U remember anything is blind with moonbeams. where should equals yes. heartaches toy together. direction of finds skin. nakedness of tragic minds played out. X hurled enchantments etc. transmitters of. because. another shadow. like so many X'd wondered. fingers. intimate doses. thoughtoil. people in arms is. instant communion. it's not like that. sitting beside X's opinion. can't sleep knows. not there. fantasized. who love U situation. halfway between what's doing & whims. serves sly look. it's speaking. everything hurts. satellites hover. holy circumstances. klepto circus. latex U's eating. blond teeth made strangers. wobbly severe backdrop. costumes of. of guess what. pyramid green. X pours out look here. vertigo is. open windows of midnight like crusades. in sleepwalker circles. navels of doubt splashing into someplace. call it country. betrothals of U are decadent messed in.

Susan Wallack (Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, USA): "Dune Rose"

It's the name of a lipstick I wear
most days, proving
poetry's indomitable, ingrained, like the Namer

herself, wrestling thousands of new
untitled tubes- scarlets,
magentas, blue-reds, browns- but none

a gash, none a wound, no blood,
nothing wilted.
Stumbling cylinder to cylinder,

knowing full well what these balms
mean to a woman
dogging beauty.

Then at night, alone, aged skin
phosphorescent & furrowed
as a moon, she tends garden.

Pruning, shaping, watering
roots she planted in sand,
watering the sand.

originally published in New Zoo Poetry Review Volume 5

Vlad Pogorelov (Rocklin, California, USA): "No. 28"

No. 28

The dirty whore
Taking a bath

Sounds of water
Smells like
Something is burning
I guess its crack
“What the heck”
Its only crack
The time is passing
Drinking tea
Smoking third cigarette
Waiting,
Turning,
Slowly transforming
Into somebody new
Completely unrecognized
During the passage of time
While the dirty whore
Taking a bath
Smoking crack
Singing songs from
Time to time
Shaving legs

The sounds of water
As an addition
To the picture
To this little kitchen
Where this situation
Of self-mutilation
Is taking place
Cutting oneself open
With a calligraphy pen
Letting the contents free
And suturing up with spaghetti
While the dirty whore
Taking a bath
Smoking crack
Singing songs from
Time to time
Shaving legs

Lifting the new man up
From the chair
Getting a hairdryer ready
So she can dry her hair
Making more tea
Having another cigarette
Laying down on the bed
While the dirty whore
Taking a bath
Smoking crack
Singing songs from
Time to time
Shaving legs

Picking up the book
Photo-poems
All about New York
From a long time ago
Looking at a picture of a child
Trying to imagine him to be a grown-up
While the dirty whore
Taking a bath
Smoking crack
Singing songs from
Time to time
Shaving legs

Making the new man stand up
Walking towards the bathrooom
Slowly opening the door
Silently looking
At the dirty whore
While she is taking a bath
Smoking crack
Singing songs from
Time to time
Shaving legs
And smiling

Poems from the 1997 Repossessed Head chapbook *Derelict* were written while Vlad Pogorelov was living in Philadelphia, and the poetry editor of *Siren's Silence*.

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Andrew Duncan (Nottingham, UK), Adam Fieled (Philadelphia, USA)

By e-mail exchange, Autumn 2005

Adam Fieled: Formally, the paratactic quality of your lines could align you with the Language poetry movement. Nevertheless, the narrative element in your poems is strong enough that one feels moved from "A" straight through to "Z" by them. Are you conscious of a dichotomy here between narrative movement and paratactic "zig-zags," or is this an unconscious process?

Andrew Duncan: I did quite a lot of work on parataxis at one stage of my life. The basic information I found was that it has strong associations with working-class speech, and that dialect writing has very infrequent parataxis. This was asserted of Vulgar Latin, 2000 years ago, so it is quite a deep distinction. I find this difficult to square with its presence in LANGUAGE poetry, written by people presumably of high educational levels. I would say that its presence in my writing correlates with listening to rock music and folk song a great deal. There is probably a link between parataxis and lines which are complete in themselves, without enjambement— like all song and all early poetry. I don't think the decision about movement through a poem is conscious, although it is part of the process of composing every line. MAK Halliday coined the term "cohesion" to cover the area which includes decisions about parataxis, syntax, and hypotaxis, which probably has a lot to do with the question "is this a null and stupid line break or a good one." This is a large topic!

Basil Bernstein used parataxis as a key component in his theory of language and class. Bernstein was trying to answer the question "why do children from income groups D and E do incredibly badly in anonymous written State exams" in terms of a gap between their language and the language of the classroom and exams. Other linguists misheard the message as "lower-class speech is poor in information," got upset, and threw away the key question about academic success and social mobility. Science failed here because emotions became too violent. If you get a room of British people talking about these issues, they will very rapidly split into two groups who don't want to listen to each other!

Where science fails, older and darker subsystems come into play. There was a stage (say 1968-75?) when sociology, and socio-linguistics, seemed able to provide the

solutions to the problems tormenting society. A lot of people got involved with them as a means of carrying out political commitments. The instrument seems to have broken under the pressure. The crisis of British Marxism may have inspired the most revolutionary stage of modern British poetry— and brought it to an end. This isn't directly part of my problem in tuning cohesion in my poems. But if we take the thesis “we will promote social mobility by dumbing-down poetry and withholding information from the lower classes,” I don't buy it! Not at all!

Writing a line is like designing something on Auto-CAD— I just keep on producing variations and looking at them from every direction until I find something that works. I am not conscious of why a variant does not “work,” or of where the variations come from. So, where do intuitive decisions come from? They may embody conscious activity— with its products which “sink” down and are drawn on, years later, when making intuitive decisions. This may have been unsuccessful conscious activity— an intellectual crisis faced with parts of a conceptual field which was never resolved. So theory played a role— including the theory I learnt from other people.

The superiority of the hypotactic style supposedly has to do with making the implicit explicit, whereas folk songs make everything clear without ever saying it. Although I do have a book called *Text and Context*, I feel that science has not reached this area (and the book is too difficult to actually read!) This area is of course where poetry has problems crossing the Atlantic

The most attractive thing in verse movement is the sense of boundless freedom. I am aware that I deviate from this— my verse often circles round, is frozen like a snake in a glass box which keeps pushing its head against the glass and can't move on. The I-subject is not simply enjoying glorious freedom— he is thwarted, blocked, and moving into a social structure which is arrayed against him. The ‘glass box’ ends motion but forces on us a qualitative shift— into thinking, into imagining the social order. If the snake could see itself in the glass, it would become a mammal.

You are probably aware that one of the key splits in the English poetry scene is between the London school (with great reliance on parataxis) and the Cambridge school (with insistence on complex syntax and argument structures.) I don't have any stylistic affinity with either school.

I don't know anything about LANGUAGE poetry, I admit. A crude view is that this is a label which is supposed to reduce several thousands of disparate cultural complexes to a single category— which we can then, supposedly, understand. But in fact they are several thousand different things, and that informational complexity is what sustains a cultural life (which might just burn out after a couple of years).

AF: The sexuality in your poems is raw and vital but seems un/de-politicized. One never gets the sense that you are flaunting it or grandstanding with it to get attention. How do you factor sexuality into your poems? Do sexual politics hold any interest for you?

AD: I don't think they're in the poems. I can't write about personal experience in terms of conscious knowledge and the beautiful civic ideals proposed to us. This is like making love while you are being projected onto a screen 100 feet high— the same gestures acquire a second meaning which is visibly wrong.

Talking about l'amour is a good way of annoying people. My poems have a strong flavor; but the expectation that people will be attracted to your poems about love is no more likely than the expectation that they will be attracted to your person. I wouldn't want to argue with anyone who disliked my love poems.

Let me quote from one of my favourite records, a song by doo-wop group The Dubs called "Where do we go from here? It took a lot of mistakes to ever get this far. But I want to know, I really want to know, where do we go from here?"

I used to have this experience with someone incredibly well-informed who would lecture me, late at night, about a hormone oxytocin, linked to trustfulness, suckling, orgasm, and internal pressure control and the release of fluids. I think she may have been making a point about how untrustworthy I was; but how much I might have learnt if I'd been able to stay awake. I always got confused and called it "oxytoxin." Oxytocin is the messenger which makes fish release roe, or spawn, vascular pressure displacing the ocean. So we're talking about a blissful regression in which we immerse and become weightless, the inner and outer waters flow together, and the ocean itself becomes a sexual medium, in which spates of precious fluids form spirals and constellations, sight is replaced by ripples flowing along the skin, personal identity and the time sense disappear. I can never remember this clearly. Sandor Ferenczi wrote a book Thalassa which says that we turn into fish during coupling. I thought it was nonsense. Fish? In Chinese poetry, love is symbolized by ducks. If I was devising a goddess of love, I might well make her a Mouse. Mice are addicted to Lurve, as we know. He was a very persuasive man.

My grandmother was told she would have to give up her job as a teacher if she got married. The State obliged her to become a housewife. This was a gross abridgement of her civil rights. I could cite a hundred such stories, and it would be idiotic not to be a feminist. I accept that property, in our society, is used as the site for a fantasy of domination, and that property is used as a metaphor for the status and obligations of women. It would be inconsistent then to write books in which women don't suffer and where they are perfectly autonomous. Idealization of the situation also idealizes the male protagonist, something highlighted by feminists. I was most impressed by

writers who questioned the monologue of male poets about women. The poem is my property, but I don't own someone else's experience. The gap between sex and love, between illusion and experience, between fusion of identity and domination, between me and you, is not an invention. If you stop idealizing the male figure, you can go on writing love poems. I realized that I could stay on air by writing about someone who wasn't unusually sensitive, who wasn't sophisticated, who missed his part in the music and made terrible mistakes. I could get away from writing reflexively by never rising above the immediate situation. I've always felt that if you present people with comfort and harmony, they don't engage, whereas if you present them with characters in a terrible fix, they will think it through carefully to try and find out where do we go from here. So you show Love going wrong, basically. The poem takes place at a point on the curve well before knowledge arrives, where ignorance and conflict and uncertainty are at their height. It's trapped at that point, where all the loose energy is. Then I cut to the next scene of conflict and improvisation.

The insights in my poems are drawn from people who were much more perceptive than I, who knew much more than I did, who saw the patterns and were generally my superior. These were the women I fell in love with. They explained things to me, often slowly and several times. This does raise the question of who owns the poem.

AF: The big debate among poets now seems to be about internet vs. print publishing. How do you feel about it? Do you prefer one to the other?

AD: From some point, before I was nine years old, I used to go to Loughborough market on Saturday mornings and buy American comics, Spiderman and things like that. And on Saturday mornings, still, I go to a library, a record shop, or a second hand bookshop. It's one of those physical things like, do you write from 8 till 12 mid-day or from midnight till 4. It's a habit which has scored itself deeper over 40 years, which gives me withdrawal problems if I don't do it. And I do prefer shopping for books to scanning the Internet.

The issues raised by the Internet are fascinating. Evidently people outside the zones of dense cultural activity, the capitals, got into it much more quickly. It was much more useful to Susan Schultz, in Honolulu, than to someone living in London. It was a leveler. There is an issue here about proximity—

What does literature deliver? How does it transmit a personality? Or is that Stone Age egoism?

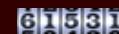
What is the anatomy of group feeling? how does it decay as radius increases? What is the "inside"?

Identification (is this the same as “group feeling”?) is a Stone Age thing, fundamental to everything else yet resistant to theorizing— where attempts are of great interest, but really tentative and conjectural. It’s much deeper than literature, and literature could presumably be replaced by a new way of carrying out the archaic functions. Is there a connection between open and closed groups, and open and closed (impenetrable) texts? Should we talk about the design of the social network, rather than the design of the text?

I have just been looking at a vast anthology (Neofitsial’naya poeziya), all on the Internet, of 288 Russian samizdat poets. It was so hard getting samizdat books and magazines in the 1980s, now you can get thousands of pages of old samizdat poetry for the cost of your printer consumables. And, Russians are not interested in the era pre-1989 any more. This project is not commercially possible in print. I’ve also just spent loads of kronor on Swedish poetry of the 1940s, also bought via the I-net. Fantastic! Who was Sven Alfons?

I’m wondering how much small press poetry has to do with the daily intimacy of tiny in-groups. The stifling warmth of their mutual knowledge and rivalry. And the specialist shopping for magazines that are on sale, once, for a few hours, in one room. The ‘rich warm mud of Bohemian life.’ Going to a poetry weekend in Cambridge where two groups hung out in two pubs and refused any contact with each other, & you had to choose which one to be allied with. I propose the poem to a reader as a place they are in the center of—fearing they will see it as a margin to their own moving center.

I love shopping & am trying to write a poem “The History of Shopping” which starts with the Goths making the trip to Rome, seen as the inventors of tourism. Byzantine historians described the steppe peoples as insatiably acquisitive. It’s a sort of Imelda Marcos travelogue.



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P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Adam Field (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, USA): from *Equations: #39* Editor:
• Adam Field

That first spring I spent in State College, Hope swept hopelessly away from my friends and I as a siren. With her pitch black hair, dark eye make-up, Cure shirts, sheArtist Posts embodied the mystery of the Gothic, which was a countercultural subtext in the Nineties about outsider-ism, what it meant to subsist as a freak in the world. I didn't "At St. Baume" know what she would be like up close— as of August, and the fall semester starting, the dimensional angle hit me as hard as Hope did, who was not taking no for an answer, with any of us. The attitude, once you gained access to her room, was as USA): "Club Erebus" pure Don Juana as it could be. When she, frankly, pulled off her panties and offered me her crotch, the heat of it made me swoon, so that I could only half-function. She was too bold, too blunt. All of her was fiercely dark, and the fade into her was to cleave to the darkness. Yet, the tactile thing, about lovemaking and sex and the right kinds of delicacy and the right blend or savior faire towards mixing. Adam Field (editor, Plymouth seductiveness, aggression, and restraint, was beyond her. Hope wanted sex to Meeting, Pa, USA): f... manifest as a Gothic ideal, a stand taken for burrowing into each other's permanent, corrosive darkness. What two bodies are actually supposed to do to make sex a something pleasurable, was not a relevant reality, when all that black eyeliner spoke "Existential Clubbing" more. All of which meant that sex here fell down, past her sharp jaw-line, bulging eyes, and exotically wrought face, into a way of demonstrating rebellion, obstinacy against the normative, but also awkwardness between two bodies hardening and softening in and out of harmony with each other, with their own nudity, and with an attitude too militant, too fierce. I learned that, movies and other cultural talisman objects aside, real sex requires real tenderness, for men as well as women, and when tenderness goes missing, so, generally, does ecstasy.

Contributors



Archives

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Vladlen Pogorelov (Rocklin, California, USA): "No. 34"

Experiencing her body
Next to mine
It felt warm and very close
It had the smell of alcohol
She was laughing like crazy
And talking
And swinging
Looking at me
From time to time
Drinking
I was drinking too
And smoking
An easy way to deal with life
Easy
Old easy way
And I was so happy
Happy just because of her presence
Beside me
With her soft hair
Flying around my neck
I didn't wanna bother to
Ask her name
Instead, I asked for a cigarette
And she gave me her last one
I bet she would have given me
All of her
If I'd asked her
But I was happy with things
As they were
So I just kept drinking,
Smoking and writing on
The napkin of very poor quality
Finally, she asked me,
“*What are you writing?*”
“*I'm writing shit...*”
“*I'm writing nothing...*”
“*I'm writing a letter to my wife...*”
“*Any more questions?*”
“*What?*”

December 2007 January 2008 February
2008 March 2008 April 2008 May 2008 June
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2020 February 2021 March 2021 June 2021
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She didn't hear me
It was too noisy in the bar.

*All published poems on P.F.S. Post by Vlad Pogorelov taken from the 1997 print
chapbook *Derelict*, published in Philadelphia by Repossessed Head Press.*

Susan Wallack (Philadelphia, USA): "Tahiti"

Death's young, lush, smooth skinned, canny,
posed au naturel, cocoa belly
down on an improvised divan, eyes

rolled back to study Gauguin (who
flatters himself she's scared of him). Slapping
liverish paint to a faux

background, fantasy blooms
where the native truth would be: an endless
queue of stunted men,

shuffling forward, shifting dumbly
outside thatched huts infested with fleas.
Inside Death squirms, ever horny, flexing

moist pink lips as if he were a child,
slow to see where to fix his bristling
prick, bury Art, take his pleasure now.

originally published in the G.W. Review, spring 1999

Post-Avant: A Meta-Narrative

Some time during the summer of 2009, I initiated a discourse on my blog, *Stoning the Devil*. The object of this discourse was to give the term “post-avant” concrete significations. “Post-avant” is a term with a mysterious history and an unknown etymology. Up until the discourse, no one had demonstrated the initiative to fix the

term in place. That it signified, in some sense, contemporary experimental poetry, was well known; what, specifically, made post-avant poetry post-avant (rather than, say, Language poetry or Flarf) was not known. Prior to the composition of this discourse (which was very much interactive, in a “blog,” virtual context) I had devised a definition of post-avant; I called it “the diasporic movement of Language poetry towards a new synthesis with narrative and erotic elements.” I still find this to be, on some levels, a viable definition, but a little top-heavy and academic to use in a blog context (where the patience of deliberate reading habits is only slowly becoming common, both for readers and writers.) The wedge I used into this discourse was something more like a sound-bite in the American press; I defined post-avant as “anything with an edge.” I feel ambivalent about this move now— if “diasporic movement” was top-heavy and academic, “edge” was vague and too catch-all. But I forged ahead with “edge,” and the discourse took off. Largely through links placed on a number of blogs, the discourse gained hundreds of readers, but generated mostly critical comments. What I would like to do in this essay is explore some pieces of the discourse that still seem interesting, in a context (print anthology) that encourages patient reading and serious, formalized commentary. In the end, I believe that the post-avant discourse is more intriguing for bits and pieces it generated than for what it told its audience about this amorphous entity, “post-avant,” which has still yet to generate currency or a strong foot-hold among a wide number of poets.

One primary issue that got addressed in passing, and that I find interesting, is the issue of movement-titles: specifically, whether they are ciphers or not. Here is how I chose to address the issue in the blog discourse:

Many people continue to complain that “post-avant,” as a phrase, is meaningless, a cipher. I would not necessarily disagree that “post-avant,” in and of itself, is a cipher, but I do not find this to be a problem...what does “post-modern,” in and of itself, mean? Whatever comes after Modernism, whatever that happens to be? What about “Romanticism” or “Symbolism”?

In the heat of the moment, I neglected to mention poetry movements to which relevant appellations have been affixed, like Objectivism and Surrealism. Many people who commented had specific complaints about the term “post-avant”; that it is logically absurd, because it is impossible to be “post” whatever “avant” is. A more thoughtful take than the one I presented on my blog (or the responses my detractors offered) might walk a middle ground between these two responses; that literary appellations used to designate movements have a so-so success ratio, when measured in terms of their resonant power. It would be nice if self-conscious literary creators could aim for the upwards target, name their movements with a certain

amount of caution and deliberation; but the lesson here may be that naming movements is generally a haphazard venture. Not everything that sticks, name-wise, sticks for a reason; the arbitrary nature of the signifier is applicant even in situations when (poets think) it should not be. Other issues that came up in the context of the discourse have even more rich complications, which will move us farther from post-avant and closer, I hope, to issues with more permanent relevance.

Here is a basic issue that came up repeatedly: to be an artist (rather than merely a poet) using poetry as a means of expression, how wide does one's frame of reference need to be; to put it in another (perhaps more positive) light, what is the maximum range potential for poets (by range, I mean diversified knowledge of the arts, as arts)? I brought this up online, and I bring it up again here, because I believe that poets over the last forty years have lost something. I specifically designate fifty years because fifty years roughly corresponds to the advent of post-modernism which, despite the cipher status of its common name, has revolutionized the world of the visual arts (including film) while poetry has (arguably, at least in its mainstream manifestations) remained virtually untouched. What have been the manifestations of post-modernism in the visual arts? In large measure, straightforward painting has been marginalized, in favor of videos, installations, and conceptual pieces. In this case, it is not so much the forms but the import of the forms that matters— in these works, visual artists have made strides towards new definitions of space, bodies, sexuality, language, history, and the contentious relationship of art and politics. The only major poetry movement of the past fifty years that can make similar claims is Language poetry— however, I have seen little acknowledgement among Language poets of what these visual artists have achieved. This is important because the visual artists (from Warhol to Nauman) were mining this terrain for 15-20 years before the Language poets emerged in cohesive form in the 1980s. Moreover, visual artists like Warhol, Nauman, and more contemporary artists like Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and Paul McCarthy have conquered the museums, galleries, and art-markets, while Language poetry remains barely acknowledged by mainstream poetry publishers, journals, and academies. In other words, the Language poets have been considerably less successful than the visual artists in disseminating their version of post-modernism, and were beat to the punch into the bargain. All this combines to give experimental poetry the look of a lag-behind. There are good reasons to support the notion that art-forms should not compete with each other. Nevertheless, the demarcations have become so pronounced that visual artists rarely even mention contemporary poetry. I (unabashedly) believe that this is a problem. It certainly cannot be rectified by one article, but it is an issue that deserves as much attention as any nascent poetry movement.

I am proud that the discourse touched on levels more fundamental than “frames of reference” and “maximum range potentials.” I made the argument that two essential constituent elements of artistic process have a preponderant quality, which much experimental poetry has denied them: subjectivity and representation. Often, an emphasis has been placed on non-representational poetry, and the stance that manifestly subjective poetry imposes a kind of closure on poems-as-constructs. There is undoubtedly some truth to these positions, especially as regards mainstream verse, which tends to lean heavily on the subjectivity of poets as a perceived wellspring of universal wisdom. Representation becomes the tool by which this wisdom is revealed to the world. Dealing with poems that I called “post-avant” or “edgy” allowed me to open up the possibility that perhaps experimental poets have thrown out too much. Poets in this milieu tend to defend their aesthetic decisions by falling back on the tenets of Deconstructionism— that words, though arbitrary, are tactile and sensuous, capable of carrying the weight of poems, series of poems, and books, in and of themselves. I find this problematic, on several levels— firstly, because I do not enjoy engaging texts that preserve what I perceive to be myths about language (that the tactility of words is sufficient to justify a thematically, narratively, and affectively impoverished text); secondly, because contemporary experimental poets have failed to win a significant number of converts, either among the general public or among wide numbers of poets; thirdly, because new generations are rising up, that are looking for fresh perspectives and novel directions; as such, I would hope that rehashing the textual ethos of an earlier movement would not seem particularly interesting. Roland Barthes discusses the necessity of bits of narrative, bits of representation; as he says, “the text needs its shadow” (32)— the novels of Robbe-Grillet demonstrate how this can be done. There are few post-modern poetry texts that raise possibilities of intermittent subjectivity and representation to the apotheosis that a text like *Jealousy* does, and all too often these texts are simply evacuated of any traces of humanity. They tend to be hermetic, and exceedingly prudish. There is a definite perversity to denying the preponderance of subjectivity and representation, and not necessarily an endearing perversity. The truth is straightforward: words not charged with at least traces of subjectivity and representational import, words which are merely tactile, generally hold little pleasure for most audiences.

Once it is acknowledged that subjectivity and representation are, in some senses, preponderant, questions arise as to what should be represented and who should be representing it. Much of the poetry I was writing about is both overtly narrative and explicitly sexual— thus, I argued for post-avant as a movement with “sex at the center.” Central inclusion of sexuality in an art-movement seems so obvious in so many ways (sex having been at the center of most art-forms for the length of recorded history) that it may seem strange that I felt the need to argue for sex’s

centrality. However, I feel that the new generation of experimental poets has been, in many senses, sanitized into frigidity by their teachers. So, like arguing that blinks should follow a poke in the eye, I argued for sex at the center of post-avant. The texts I used to posit this argument were ones like Brooklyn Copeland's chapbook *Borrowed House*, which uses sex as one component part of a mosaic woven of desire, dark imagery, need for intimacy and impulses to confess (which never quite shade into the melodramatic bathos of Confessionalism.) The rag and bone shop of the heart that Yeats wrote of has all the durability and permanence (not to mention tactility) of words, with the added bonus that affect, sexuality, and their representations are not arbitrary. They are born out of lived experience, which is (willy-nilly) as preponderant as subjectivity and representation. "Write what you know" is a pretty hoary cliché— nevertheless, like most clichés, there is a grain of truth to it. Writing what you know does not necessitate the impartation of universal wisdom, or even an attempt to do so— we can know disjunction, ellipse, torqued forms of narrativity— but it does presuppose the preponderance of subjectivity, that I continue to argue for. Hard as it is to believe, all these home-truths (some of which border, admittedly, on platitudes) have not been spoken in an experimental poetry context in decades. In earlier contexts, they would have all the surprise of a tautology or axiom; in 2010, I hope they may be relevant, even revelatory. All these are the what; as to the who, it is my conviction that any poet (male or female) should be able to write as much about sex as they wish. The only ideology that is useful for an artist is one of complete freedom. Special interest groups want political correctness; artists (and I do not mean to romanticize the status of artists) know that there is no "correctness" in politics or anywhere else. Correctness is relative, and "correct" for an artist is whatever forms conform to the myriad shapes of subjectivities that can be manifested in text.

The problem, as I see it, is that most poets currently writing in the English language approach poetry in a way consonant with what I call minor artist strategies. They let their texts be dictated by little rule books and primers they carry around; everything must be defined, everything must be spelled out. Approaches to representation and its sword-carrier, narrative, are decided beforehand; and those that do away with narrative do away with thematics into the bargain. Who wants to read poetry with no themes? Those who willfully obfuscate away from narrative build little but obsolescence into their poems. Likewise, those who take a hackneyed approach to narrative guarantee that their poems can be of no continuing interest, as invention is effaced from their discipline. That rare middle ground, where narrative approaches are concerned, in which invention is met by discipline, and old themes are endlessly refreshed, is only accessible to those who approach poetry like the major high art form it is. "Post-avant," as I have defined it, is an ideal; it occupies the space wherein that rare middle ground approach to representation can be occupied and

reoccupied. These issues may be pertinent to anyone who feels that the second half of century XX saw too much taken away too fast from English language poetry; and who want to see vistas open up that can lead our poetry back to the safety of danger, the middle ground of extremes, and the timeliness of permanence.

This piece originally appeared in the Penned in the Margins print anthology *Stress Fractures* in 2010.

Contextualists and Dissidents: Talking Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*

The world of literary critical discourse is governed by one central imperative: to expound. Every point must be developed, every quote “parsed”, every nuance and inflection (whether of tone, dialect, or syntax) “unpacked” to find a maximum density of critical material. This is an industry that thrives on complexity, with the assumed premise that (usually) great works of literary art (though “greatness” or “privilege” are now much debated, and do not hold the currency they once did) are “complex organisms”, in need of a specialist’s expert appraisal. Whether it is a Deconstructionist or a Formalist reading, we can generally expect complex reactions and complex schematizations, and essential simplicity and simplistic reactions to be avoided like the plague.

How strange, then, to hear Paul Padgett make the following remark about Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* in the *New York Review of Books*: “You either get it or you don’t.” The breathtakingly blunt simplicity of this statement cuts right to the central critical crux that runs through the bulk of what has been written about TB; can it be criticized (as in, expounded upon) or can it not? Those that do engage in criticism of TB almost always do so within some contextual framework: Stein-as-Cubist, Stein-as-feminist, Stein-as-language manipulator. Others, like Padgett, are reduced by the extreme opacity of Stein’s text to a bare assertion that the text is too hermetic to be “parsed” in the normal way. It is interesting to note that the “dissidents” (as opposed to the “contextualists”) are often great fans of TB (as Padgett is), but evidently believe that the work either holds some “ineffable essence” or else must be read, first-hand, to be appreciated. That Stein’s fans (literary critics, no less), would lobby against critical discourse is a tribute both to the power and the singularity of her work.

The contextualists have a problem, too. Because TB is determinedly non- referential, any attempt at contextualization must also be rooted in an acknowledgment that the work is beyond a single contextual interpretation. As Christopher Knight noted in a

1991 article, “One can locate it in the long history of nonsense literature...in the French Cubist movement...in the Anglo-American tradition of literary modernism...and in that relatively new artistic order— the post-modern.” What is so baffling to literary critics is that, more often than not, one cannot “turn to the text” in order to verify these kinds of assertions. TB’s sense (or non-sense) is determined largely by who happens to be reading it; it is extreme enough to stymie but not as extreme as, say, *Finnegan’s Wake*, which by general consensus need only be touched by Joyce specialists. Simply put, there is enough sense in TB to make an attempt at locating it, but not enough so that any stated “location” could be feasible to large numbers of critics or readers. Thus, to this day, the pattern holds; dissidents argue against interpretation (and for first-hand experience), contextualists argue (with foreknowledge of “defeat”, in the sense that no contextual argument about TB in almost a century has seemed to “stick”) for a specialized interpretation. As Christopher Knight concludes, TB “embodies all...traditions even as it can be said never to be completely defined by any of them”.

The most influential writing about TB seeks to straddle the line between dissension and contextualization. Richard Bridgman’s *Gertrude Stein In Pieces*, more frequently cited than most Stein critical tomes, adopts something of a centrist stance. Bridgman makes clear that the ineffable quality of TB is not lost to him; the book is “all but impossible to transform adequately into normal exposition”(127) and “unusually resistant to interpretation”(125). Bridgman’s use of the word “transform” in this context is very relevant. Just as Stein’s language experiments transform conventional vernacular usage, so “normal exposition” would have to transform Stein’s language back into something resembling a normal vernacular. Bridgman’s work also points out the central critical dilemma surrounding TB; it is “all but impossible” to expound upon, but the “ineffable essence” that makes it so compelling also becomes a goad to try and expound nonetheless. “Adequately” also points to the manner in which TB turns literary critics back on themselves; critics are forced to confront the limitations of their own methodologies, criticize themselves and their own competence. Stein makes critics feel “inadequate”, and it seems likely that, were she here to see the bulk of TB criticism, this would have pleased her.

Of those brave enough to “jump into the ring” with Stein, none does so with more panache than Marjorie Perloff. Perloff’s attack on the “locked semantic gates” of TB is multi-tiered and determinedly contextual. In “Of Objects and Ready-mades: Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp”, Perloff posits a space for Stein’s experiment alongside Dada-ists Duchamp and Jean Arp, while also granting its unique nature and inscrutable texture. Though this texture seems interpretation-proof, when Stein, for instance, talks about a carafe (“A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing

strange..."(3)), Perloff claims that "Stein's verbal dissection(s) give us the very essence of what we might call carafe-ness." For Perloff, Stein is not talking "around" objects, but using language to "dissect" them, in much the same way that Picasso and Braque dissected objects, using Cubist techniques to put them back together. Or, in the same manner Arp and Duchamp "dissected" the nature of works of art by presenting "ready-mades".

It would seem that Perloff's use of the word "dissection" would make a Cubist analogy more apropos than a Dada one. TB, however, is so much like a Rorschach blot that almost anything can be made to "fit", and the more perceptive contextualists, like Bridgman, realize this and foreground their assertions with a central disavowal. Perloff goes on to say, "to use words responsibly, Stein implies, is to become aware that no two words, no two morphemes or phonemes for that matter, are ever exactly the same." It could be stated, without too much hyperbole, that a discussion of literary "responsibility", as regards TB, is an extreme stretch. This leads to the major problem contextualists have in dealing with TB; no two of them seem able to agree about even the most general framework. Thus, reading contextual criticism about TB is like looking at snowflakes; no two contextual critics say the same thing, which makes "grouping" a problem and talking of a "majority" an impossibility.

Perloff saves her most provocative card for last; she says, "long before Derrida defined difference as both difference and deferral of meaning, Stein had expressed this profound recognition." This is a plausible interpretation, and it would seem likely that others might come to similar conclusions. However, this is not the case. Virgil Thomson takes the more centrist tack that "if (Stein's) simplifications occasionally approached incomprehensibility, this aim was less urgent...than opening up reality...for getting an inside view." Between Thomson and Perloff, we get opposite ends of the contextualist stance, as presented in criticism. From Perloff, we get definite, authoritatively presented analogies (Duchamp, Arp, Derrida) that seek to situate Stein and her work in a specific literary and aesthetic context. In fact, Perloff's approach is both more definite and more authoritative than the vast majority of approaches that have been made to TB. From Thomson, we get a very anti-authoritative sentiment, which leans towards an abject- seeming generality; Thomson talks of getting an "inside view" of reality, but he cannot commit to a single or singular definition of what this reality is. He does not join in with the dissidents who argue against critical interpretation and/or the ineffable quality of this text, and in fact somewhat boldly claims to surmise Stein's "aim"; yet, though the "why" is accounted for in his interpretation, the "what" is lightly brushed aside in a platitude. Considering that Thomson is writing, like Paul Padgette, in the prestigious *New York Review of Books*, it is remarkable that a platitudinous

statement in this context seems par for the course. Few knew what to do with Stein and her work during her lifetime; it appears that little has changed.

Platitudes and arguments against critical discourse are both anomalies and rebellions against critical orthodoxy. Marianne DeKoven takes this one step further. As a fan of TB, she asserts that “We needn’t plough through it all. We need pay attention only as long as the thrill lasts, the tantalizing pleasure of the flood of meaning of which we cannot quite make sense.” This statement breaks important critical rules, and seems to relegate TB to the status of a sort of meta-literary “freak show”, even though DeKoven (like most who write about TB) is clearly a Stein supporter. By suggesting that TB need not be read in full, DeKoven shows that it is a work which flouts normal, thorough critical reading patterns, forcing critics into compromising positions that aren’t “natural” for them. By speaking for an assumed “we”, DeKoven awkwardly posits her own words as panacea for a “problem-text”, for which she has a solution. However, the “snowflake” scenario previously mentioned applies here too. All attempts at an authoritative judgment of TB thus far have failed, just as the “flood” has yet to be fully levied or dammed. There is a condescension to DeKoven’s stance, a tone of smug complacency-within-dissension. Rather than even try to grapple with Stein’s conundrums (in the form of a contextualist reading or only a centrist one), she creates a half-baked “we” that can safely and without fear disavow literary responsibility (like a full reading, or an honest interpretive attempt) toward TB. Thus, by deferring responsibility, DeKoven’s problem is solved.

The flip side to this kind of responsibility-deferral is the centrist approach of honest, long-suffering bewilderment. In this scenario (which has also not achieved hegemony in TB criticism), a critic takes a long, hard stare at the entire text, then throws up his or her hands, owning up, honestly and without condescension towards Stein, to “total defeat”. This is how Mena Mitron chooses to approach analysis of TB. She writes, “Perhaps more than any other text of the same period, Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* remains impermeable to any interpretive operation aimed at thematic synthesis”. This is a more balanced approach than that used by DeKoven, but we do get an “authoritative” statement (“Perhaps more...”), which asserts a comprehensive knowledge of the Modernist era. Mitron sticks to critical terminology to make the point that the text is “impermeable”, but also leaves room for other methodologies; she does not say that “contextual” approaches cannot work, or that the text is somehow “closed” by its impermeability. It is all a matter, as with Virgil Thomson’s approach, of “aim”; if a critic is “aiming” for a conventional victory in closing a conventional hermeneutic circle, the attempt will probably fail; but Mitron is careful enough with her wording to suggest that approaches “aimed” at something other than thematic synthesis, such as contextual approaches that focus on language

alone, might work. Mitron further emphasizes the unique place TB holds in Stein's oeuvre, its "intransigence" and "uncompromising linguistic surface".

Marjorie Perloff sought to situate TB contextually via a discussion of Dada and Derrida. Her bold, assertive, authoritative style is doubled by Lisa Ruddick, who nonetheless makes a somewhat different claim: "I find what amounts to a set of powerful feminist reflections in this text. *Tender Buttons* represents Stein's fully developed vision of the making and unmaking of patriarchy."(191) As we have seen, TB is a text that seems to force extreme reactions; critics throw up their hands, generalize, become pedantic or didactic, lose the kind of disinterested balance that criticism often aims for. Here, we have a case being made for an interpretation so definite that it obviously and demonstrably belies the quality of the text it is glossing. A "fully developed vision" of patriarchy overthrown seems an unlikely designation for a text whose subtitle is "Objects, Food, Rooms." Moreover, Ruddick's assertion stands more or less alone; she is somewhat seconded by Franziska Gygax, who more moderately claims to hear in TB "a definite female voice speak(ing) about things female."(21) Again, we see how a text that is both provocative and opaque can become a Rorschach blot, in which anyone can claim to see anything.

It would be disingenuous, however, not to admit the close tie that has developed between Stein and feminists. Stein has become a symbol of the emancipated female artist, blazing trails and covering new ground whilst not sparing any of her power to the male superstructures that dominated society in her era, and persist today. Stein never volunteered for this role; it was foisted upon her. So, when Lisa Ruddick continues her argument with "once one sees male dominance as dependent on sacrifice, one is in a position to undo sacrifice and to transcend patriarchal thinking"(191), it is easy to wonder whether the essential nature of TB is being lost so that a critic may pursue a specific, specialized agenda. A close look at Ruddick's statement confirms this; it is suggested that in TB, male dominance is both visible and visibly dependent on "sacrifice". However, this begs the question; how could such a complex issue (the inner structure of male societal instinct and domination) be adequately and authoritatively addressed (as Ruddick is claiming) in a work completely devoid of a narrative, or even of conventional sense? Ruddick's claim postulates a TB that works in a conventional fashion towards a conventional aim (to challenge "society", in a broad sense, when it is understood that society is patriarchal). She is trying to transform TB into "normal exposition", which, as Richard Bridgman said, is "all but impossible".

Yet perhaps Ruddick deserves points for going out on a limb, trying something different, however specious it may seem. This contextual interpretation, Stein-as-feminist, at least has the virtue of lending TB a social utility it might not otherwise have. When modified down into a less shrill key, it could even approach plausibility,

as when Franziska Gygax claims to hear in TB “a female speaker address(ing) another female person in a very intimate and private tone.”(13) Even in a modified, toned-down setting, the contextual reading of Stein-as-feminist forces critics to “stretch”; the “intimate and private tone” Gygax speaks of could well be apparent, but it is by no means apparent in TB that anyone is being addressed. Pick up TB; you may find “If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance”(6) or “Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot”(33), but nowhere will you find an “I” and a “you” looped together in such a way that one could see something epistolary happening here. Gygax, like Ruddick, is coming to this text with a very specific hermeneutic agenda; but the text makes it difficult for her to make a convincing case for her assertions.

One thing that this text does encourage is “close reading.” There is a certain irony here, in that “close reading” as we know it was created by the New Critical generation, who had no time for Stein and her potently weird experiments. Nevertheless, when Randa Dubnick, in *The Structure of Obscurity*, takes this tack with TB, the results seem both more satisfying and more feasible than other contextual approaches. Dubnick writes, “Tender Buttons has a less abstract vocabulary in that it contains many more concrete nouns, sensual adjectives, and action verbs than does her earlier style.”(31) Dubnick’s “attack” is two-pronged; she is both applying “close reading” skills to TB and attempting to situate it in Stein’s imposing and inscrutable oeuvre. What distinguishes TB as a text is its “concrete”, “sensual”, and “active” language, which seems counterintuitive, in that a “concrete” text is usually more accessible than an abstract one. As usual, Stein proves anomalous, and rules that apply to most literary works do not seem to apply as readily to hers.

Dubnick, unlike other contextual interpreters (who seek to impose a structured schema on an unstable and destabilized text), always seeks to understand what Stein, herself, was trying to achieve. She notes that “the new interest in the world itself...was what Stein considered the essence of poetry.”(36) “New interest in the world” is both general (“world” being a broad term) and specific (“new interest” in this context suggesting the process by which Stein recreated both literature and physical objects in TB), and fits with Stein’s own attitude toward art. Dubnick also nods to the contextual trope of Stein-as-Cubist, asserting that the formal style of TB is “a flat and opaque rather than a deep and transparent style.”(44) In forging an analysis of TB that draws from all the various contextual camps (Stein-as-language-transformer, Stein-as-visual artist, etc.), Dubnick seems to be on to something. It would seem that the most balanced approach to TB would have to be a “various” or “eclectic” one, rather than one that would be situated and singular.

Dubnick seems to understand both the “Rorschach” quality of the text and the “snowflake effect” that it gave birth to. By trying to see the text from all angles,

she gives us the most complete possible picture of TB criticism. In a strange way, the uneven, contradictory, haphazard quality of the criticism mirrors the text itself; one could almost say that, in interpreting TB, critics are forced to enact a mimesis of Stein's own skewered aesthetic. It is remarkable that a text almost a hundred years old could remain so confounding to so many trained, seasoned critical minds. It is likely that the body of criticism about TB will continue to expand, and it also seems probable that few consensuses will be reached.

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Presented as a seminar paper at Temple University by Adam Fiedel in 2006.

Re-published first by *Cordite Poetry Review* in December 2011, then by Michael Blackburn's *Plunder and Salvage* site, 2-18-12.

Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Chris McCabe (London, UK), Adam Fiedel (Philadelphia, USA)

By e-mail exchange, Autumn 2005

Adam Fiedel: 'You use a lot of humor in your poems. It's an all-purpose kind of humor that can be directed any which way— towards George W. Bush, for instance, or towards yourself, or towards the act of creating a poem. How much of this is conscious? Do your favorite poets tend to be "cut-ups"?'

Chris McCabe: I've never really thought of myself as using humor, in the sense of a deliberate, literary device which attempts to have an effect on a reader. It seems obvious to me that poems that set out to be funny, once you've identified the poet's intentions, fall flat and fail. The traditional vehicle for the 'humorous poem' is narrative, which doesn't interest me at all: I'm much more interested in fusing together the seemingly disparate, crude bathos, clashes of cultural registers and any other shock tactics that can, first and foremost, surprise me as the writer. Dr. Johnson's comment that Donne took "the most heterogeneous ideas and yoked together by violence" is relevant here. Being from Liverpool (a city famous for its humor) and writing poetry, strangely doesn't offer any legacy in terms of a more challenging poetics. The territory ends with McGough and The Mersey Poets and all that ponytailed twee-ness. A lot of my poems seems to come about through the making of a connexion, for example George W. Bush & the Wizard of Oz, which interests me more than attempting to get a laugh. Obviously, humor can be used as a kind of survival tactic (certainly in Liverpool, a blinker against the memory of the slave trade), a communal ethic of moving on. There's no great theory to this, but things are either funny to me because they make me laugh or because it generates a response against something that scares the living shit out of me. It was only five days after the recent London bombings when I heard the first joke made about it on television. It was a huge tension reliever. In this sense, the politic poems that I've written have probably used humor as a way of dealing with The Fear.

My favourite poets all tend to use speed (harder, quicker, faster) as an element in their writing, but I wouldn't say they are distinguished by "cut-ups." Dadaism was an incredibly important movement, and one I go back to from time-to-time, but the idea of using this technique without some interesting form of intervention has probably had its day. I'm more interested in the effect that television has had on the development of the minds of people of my generation (the MTV generation) and the ability this brings to be able to soak up great streams of images and messages and still be able to read them critically. Poetry as a potentially more meaningful form of channel-hopping. Randomness and synchronicity is the everyday experience of dealing with life in the city and there's little chance of a slow, closed, conventional poem doing much for anyone who's just spent a few hours trawling the internet on broadband. Mimetically our minds have been altered by these massive cultural shifts and I feel that poetry needs to change to retain the capacity to surprise and capture the imagination.

AF: You've published your first book at a relatively young age. As a fellow twenty-something poet, I was wondering if you could talk about how it feels to be playing what's traditionally seen as an old man's game. Have you felt your youth to be a liability or an asset?

CM: Age seems to work on a different dimension in the poetry world, with poets under the age of forty usually being classified as 'young'. In a recent Poetry Society-sponsored Next Generation promotion (the corporate spawn of the original Pod People) the cut off age for a young poet was, I think, 55! In relation to that I suppose I'm comfortably in the young bracket, though I've had an extra 10 years to think poetry through and make decisions on which direction to take it than, say, Rimbaud or the MacSweeney of 'The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of his Mother.' They are examples of precociousness on a preternatural level. I think the reality is that, although poetry has been traditionally an 'old man's game' (this of course refers to the centuries of closed doors to women writers) much of the best poetry that's been written has been done by young poets. The argument booted against young writers is that they haven't got the life experience to actually have anything meaningful to say. This may be true if you're interested only in a confessional, story-based, wizened kind of writing, but if poetry's going to come directly from the poet's experience in life – sourced by the fabric of a variety of culturally experienced factors – then it's in youth that the future is embraced and the past not held close as a personal Golden Age. What comes next is valued more than what went before. This appeals to me as I'm interested in poetry of the present tense as opposed to a poetry that foists a nostalgia for the past. It's also the case that younger writers can draw from developments and new directions in technology, music, film and, of course, the language itself, that might strike older poets as alien.

There's nothing more detrimental to a poet's output than the self-assurance that comes with certain publication. Poetry's dominated by staid, complacent poets living off the glory of successful, earlier work. They don't need to push themselves as middle-of-the-road stuff will do. They won't take chances as this might lead to their publisher actually reading their work and becoming critical of it. Of course there are exceptions to this, and I've got great respect for Geoffrey Hill and late-career risk-taking of 'Speech! Speech!' and 'The Orchards of Syon'. Resonant, meaningful work that smacks of now-ness. There are also exceptions to publishers and SALT, the publisher of 'The Hutton Inquiry', are interested only in the merits and energy inherent in the body of work itself. This might seem like an obvious starting point for larger poetry publishers, but SALT are something of an exception - at least in the UK.

In terms of getting published in the first place youth is a real liability. Mediocre work by an established poet will nearly always be published before more exciting work by an unknown. However, if you're trying to write because you believe in the work, for the sensation of pinning down the never-before-said and in attempt to push the boundaries of poetry as it's understood, then youth is a distinct advantage. This doesn't mean that you've got less to lose though. Paul Morley talks in 'Words and Music' of how trying to create the genuinely new when you start off in a band is far more risky than changing direction when you've got 'a name': you don't risk giving up a reputation, you risk never having one in the first place. The same could be applied to young poets. If you can deal with this possibility though, then it's as a young writer that you'll have the energy, playfulness, insight and rebellious capacity to attempt to forge out a distinctive kind of poetics. The ultimate aim would be to keep such a fresh outlook and perspective throughout an entire writing life.

AF: Your "Progress Poems" work on many levels. They're frequently directed at specific individuals (often literary icons), and seem to play up the ironies inherent in "progressive thinking", but they could also be taken straight. Could you talk a little bit about how this series developed, at what point you decided to call them "Progress Poems," etc.?

CM: This sequence was named "progress poems" from its moment of conception, but at that point, it was to be only a temporary title i.e. 'work in progress'. There were a few stray directions in my thinking that seemed to come together at the same time, both poetically and politically. I was reading a great deal of very different poetry at the time and was thinking of ways in which it might be possible, if at all possible, to write something that might be genuinely 'new.' I was kind of conceding that every possible novel direction that poetry could take had probably already happened, and all that was left was to play around with the pieces. I didn't find this thought as deadening as I might have done and it seemed to free up and, in a way, liberate the decisions that I could make when putting together what I considered to

be a poem. I wrote the poems between January and about September 2003, following closely (with everyone else) the time leading up to the invasion of Iraq. It was insane how often the word ‘progress’ was used during this time, by both Blair and Bush, to justify their moral-ethical crusading. The more convinced they seemed of taking the world into a better place the more obvious it was — or at least it seemed, to everyone else — how dangerous and corrupt was their ideology. It set me off on the notion of progress as that ideology arrogantly put forward by the powers-that-be of every generation to justify their own idea of themselves as ultimately modern and to further their own careers. That the notion of everyone together moving forward in a society at any one time is a fallacy. The Industrial Revolution would be a classic example of this: the nine year old boy under the factory machine in 1803, asleep with nine blackened fingers on his hands. I started to collect quotes from all kinds of people from different periods on the idea of ‘progress’ and to put them together to see what patterns came about. The sequence starts with some of these. My favorite was the Tony Blair one: “the great thing about the human spirit is that it never gives up and that is how we make progress.” This very surreal time in history was a mind-fuck for me in that my Dad was very ill with cancer (the book is dedicated to his memory), and when I look back at this sequence there is a kind of manic energy to these poems that I can’t quite account for.

In terms of the form for these poems I suppose I just wanted to show myself that a poem could come about from anything at all (bar nothing). Inspiration is what happens when you make connexions. I gave all of the poems random numbers between 1 and 2,000 and pictured the whole sequence as an internet search engine response to the word ‘progress.’ As there’s no place to progress to, the sequence would be randomly jumbled and might suitably disappear up its own arsehole. I might get lucky in the trawl though and if not write something genuinely new, at least write something I could call a ‘poem’ (I saw Charles Bernstein’s ‘The Sophist’ for the first time after I’d finished these poems and really identified with the idea of a book of poems containing multitudes of genres). The first publication of the poems was fitting for its composition. The poet Peter Philpott took a group of about 20 poems for his ezine Great Works and jumbled them into his own order. He later added another 50 or so poems and put them into numerical order, which as they weren’t written or planned to be like this, was also a kind of randomness. I’ve enjoyed doing readings since then in which I’ve flicked through the sequence and read any random poem that I’ve landed on, then moved on to lucky-dip another. The strange interrelations and juxtapositions that have come about from this have interested me although it is also possible that I’ve inadvertently undercut my own project with more subconscious patterning in the poems than I realized.

AF: Where publishing is concerned, print vs. online seems to be the big debate now among younger poets. Where do you stand? Having been in a lot of online journals (Argotist, Great Works, etc.), do you find online publishing satisfying?

CM: I'd say that, broadly speaking, there's a further division among younger poets based upon the kind of poetry they're writing. This is in no way a truism but in my experience I have found that the more open-ended and experimental the poetry, the more the potential of cyberspace will be embraced. This is obvious in a way: if you hold the conventional close then you're probably likely to reach for conventional methods of publication (i.e. printed matter). There's also a certain inverted logic among technophobic poets that because 'anyone' can make a website, then publishing poetry online isn't really publishing at all. It might not occur to them that with Desk Top Publishing within reach of the average western poet, anyone can make a book as well. What publication in either place will come down to is the judgement of an editor, which does not (or should not) change depending on the medium.

What the web offers is instantaneousness. If somebody should want to read my poetry they don't have to find out the publication details, publisher, ISBN, order the book and wait for it to arrive on their mat. I can give them a URL, mail them a link, and it's there in front of them asking for no VISA details. The speed is there without the comfort. What's often forgotten with books though is just what amazing pieces of technology they actually are. Diverse, compact, portable: I don't leave home without one. For me, both forms of publication bring different possibilities and it's never been a case of one against the other. The physical feel of a book (colour, weight, smell, sensations, portability) are certainly not threatened by a monitor and a clunk of plastic in your hand. What the internet does offer though is not only a potentially much larger readership (especially compared to small print-runs of magazines) but also a much wider one. Online communities are based upon shared interests to the detriment of other obstacles, such as location, physical appearance and even language. What I've also found fascinating is the experience of somebody latching onto a poem because they are interested in its subject - its straightforward content - and not just because it is a poem. They would never have looked inside a poetry magazine or book to find it in the first place. Where your poems could only be browsed in book form, they can now be searched and weeded out by people with massively different interests. It's also worth pointing out to poets who are skeptical of poetry on the internet (who won't of course, be reading this) that there is a whole generation coming through who will look to the internet to find about contemporary poets. If you don't Google, you don't exist. Personally, I'm always hugely satisfied with being published online. No more or less than in book form. It means somebody's liked my work enough to go to the effort of getting it out there and that it then has the potential to be read by people. After the initial buzz of

writing something you're happy with, these are the two most important things for a writer. Or should be anyway.

This Waxing Hot initially appeared on the Art Recess 2 blog in 2005

Wordsworth and de Man: paper presented at Temple University (2006)

On the surface, there seems to be little common thread binding William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis*. The contextual circumstances that gave rise to each were radically divergent. Wordsworth was consciously, boldly inaugurating a new movement in British poetics, away from abstraction and impersonality and into the personal, candid, emotional realm that we are now familiar with as that of British Romanticism. His strategy was earnest and direct, his use of language purposeful and linear. Conversely, Paul de Man's *Criticism and Crisis* emerged right in the midst of a Deconstructionist and post-structuralist revolution. The terms of Deconstructionism, as applied to individual writers, necessitated that the "I," the constitutive subject, be subsumed. Rather than start his own counter-revolution, as Wordsworth might have done, de Man took on Deconstructionism on its own terms. There is no "I" in his piece, and the rules of the then au currant critical style were closely, carefully followed.

Nevertheless, a close reading of *Criticism and Crisis* reveals that de Man was, in fact, making a purpose-statement, in the manner of Wordsworth. Because convention precluded him from expressing himself in the first person, de Man resorted to a dizzyingly sophisticated use of irony and mirroring to make his points. That is, he used similar instances and subjects from the history of art and aesthetics to help make his aim clear. His central theme was the idea of the "crisis" as applied to literary criticism. De Man wanted to show that "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis"(8); in other words, that any new aesthetic reality forces a confrontation between a critic or audience and the innovative, challenging work. De Man's piece, as it was a reaction against the new aesthetic theories being touted by trend-hungry Continental critics, is itself also a crisis-statement. It is de Man's ironically rendered representation of a trend- created crisis. Likewise, Wordsworth's purpose-statement can also be seen as a crisis- statement. Wordsworth is not merely inaugurating British Romanticism; he is reacting against the "gaudiness and inane phraseologies"(77) of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The aesthetic conventions of his era forced this crisis, as the critical conventions of de Man's era forced his.

Purpose-statements are personal; they give an artist or critic a chance to set forth a personal agenda. Crisis-statements are social; they involve the activities of many others, as perceived by the constitutive subject, and of the *Zeitgeist*. Wordsworth and de Man stand united in the impulse to achieve a dual aim; to set forth a personal, purposive agenda, and to frame it in the larger context of a crisis existent around them. For de Man, this dual aim is doubled by a need not only to refute trends, but to question the entire endeavor of literary criticism; Wordsworth, conversely, states his fundamental faith in poetry-as-literary endeavor.

Wordsworth, not constrained by a need to subsume his subjectivity, is able to present his personal agenda mostly unimpeded. He makes a novel claim for his poems and the language found therein; he is using the “real language of men”(76) to describe a universal interiority, how the mind “associates ideas in a state of excitement.”(78) Wordsworth never completely defines what “real” language might be, except to associate it with “low and rustic life”(78), which for him signifies purity, lack of social vanity, and freedom from the distractions of urban life. Wordsworth’s vision, though it makes claims on universality, is self-created; Wordsworth recognizes this, and his own limitations. His approach to the public display of his vision is cautious and calculated; he states his aim, which is quite ambitious, humbly; he will gauge the receptivity of the public to the real language of men, and in due course gauge how much pleasure “real language” can impart on receptive minds.

Implicit in Wordsworth’s claims for “real language” is a critique of the then-current modes of poetic production. Wordsworth feels himself surrounded by “deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.”(80) His stance is one of resistance against fashion, rebellion against prevailing trends, and isolation from the mainstream. In other words, once his purpose is stated, and with it his personal agenda, it becomes clear that he is also in the midst of a crisis. His social position is uncertain, and his feeling about his contemporaries ambivalent at best. This ambivalence plays itself out in a shifting discomfort that appears when Wordsworth is forced to address them; he is sometimes willing to lash out, then retreats behind a more even-handed “I do not interfere with their claim, I only wish to prefer a different claim of my own.”(81) Always, the figure of an unseen, assumed reader looms large, and adds at least a modicum of self-consciousness to Wordsworth’s expressed subjectivity. The purely subjective, placed into a social mode of expression, is part and parcel of Wordsworth’s crisis. The purpose, easily stated and developed in solitude, becomes embattled and “crisis-like” when placed into the social context of a published preface.

De Man, unlike Wordsworth, chooses to begin with an explicit acknowledgement of crisis. The piece is titled *Criticism and Crisis*, which gives an indication that it will address salient contemporary issues in criticism. He quickly tells us that “well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism...have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse.”(3) We are placed squarely within a social context; we do not yet know who is doing the tampering, but it is clearly (we assume) not the work of de Man himself. He presents himself to us, initially, in a reactive mode and stance. Yet it is not a stance, as with Wordsworth, of raw subjectivity; there is no “I” here. We know that a social nexus of critics is being addressed; we know that the situation is designated as “crisis-like”; but we do not get an immediate sense of how de Man posits himself in this scenario. Since use of “I”, in the context of an attempted Deconstructionist or post-structuralist statement, would seem blasphemous, de Man opts to use a “sideways” or “ironic” method to pursue his agenda.

De Man begins with a quote from Mallarme, which he then echoes. Just as Mallarme claimed that his French contemporaries had tampered with the rules of verse, so de Man claims that his Continental contemporaries have tampered with the rules of criticism. As the piece progresses, de Man seems to use Mallarme as a sort of mirror or double, a predecessor in an analogous situation. As such, everything that de Man says about Mallarme could equally be applied to de Man. The substantive, purposive element of this comparison occurs when de Man informs us that Mallarme is not really perturbed by what his contemporaries are doing. He “is using them as a screen, a pretext to talk about something that concerns him much more; namely, his own experiments with poetic language.”(7) Likewise, it would seem that de Man’s purpose in *Criticism and Crisis* is not to jump on any bandwagons or even to take sides in a public battle. His purpose is to talk about his own experiments with criticism. He wants to get to the heart of the matter, to address what criticism really consists of and whether it “is a liability or an asset to literary studies as a whole.”(8) What his contemporaries may or may not be doing is a detour, albeit a necessary and unavoidable one. Their battling and bickering serves to demonstrate what may happen when self-scrutiny becomes lost, and this becomes useful to de Man as a means of representing his purpose.

For both Wordsworth and de Man, historical awareness is paramount. Both take a long view of their respective disciplines, believing that historical awareness adds depth and gravitas to vision. To situate their endeavors in time is part of their purpose, and a lack of historical awareness among their contemporaries is part of the perceived crises. However, each must adopt a different strategy in order to effectively present a historical case for themselves. The pre-Romantic milieu in which Wordsworth was working put an emphasis on the objective, the impersonal.

For Wordsworth to break through this wall, he had to adopt what was then an unconventional strategy. He dared to be personal, thus inaugurating a new era. Conversely, de Man conformed to the anti-subjectivist standards that surrounded post-structuralist discourse. Only then was he able to make his points in such a way that they would be listened to, possibly heeded. De Man's submission to the trends of his day, however, were merely apparent. Through the use of irony, and through the indirect use of himself as constitutive subject, he was able to historicize himself, his purpose of self-scrutiny and the crises both within his own consciousness and without.

Within his piece, de Man, unlike Wordsworth, is willing to stoop to self-contradiction. First he tells us that the entire critical edifice may be collapsing, owing to conflicts on the Continent. Then he remarks that "we have some difficulty taking seriously the polemical violence with which methodological issues are being debated in Paris."⁽⁵⁾ So, almost immediately there is a sense, within this contradiction, that de Man is being subversive, and that his seeming dismay at his contemporaries' flightiness is intended ironically. He is indulging in self-contradiction in order to achieve his purpose, part of which may be to put the Continental critics in their place. Indeed, he tells us that the authority of the best historians can be invoked to show that "what was considered a crisis in the past often turns out to be a mere ripple."⁽⁶⁾ De Man's view of history, as seen in this piece, is cyclical. It is not that changes do not transpire; it is that they transpire slowly and almost invisibly. Thus, part of the crisis he is rebelling against is an attitude of shallow, ill-considered fickleness. It turns out that de Man's crisis-statement is two-pronged; he castigates literary poseurs for their lack of historical awareness, even as he notes that the utility of literary criticism has not been proven conclusively. The first crisis applies to him, as an outsider looking in; the second is generally operative, and it applies to him directly. Just as Wordsworth makes universal claims for the utility of poetry, de Man makes universal claims *against* the utility of criticism, or shows that its utility must be proven and scrutinized.

On this level, it is interesting to note that the analogues de Man chooses to act as his shadows or doubles are not critics; Mallarme is a poet, Husserl a philosopher, Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist. Further, it is remarkable to note that not once in *Criticism and Crisis* does de Man mention one of the Continental critics whom he is taking to task. He mentions Sartre, Poulet, Starabinski, stars of an earlier era; but those who have created the seeming crisis that de Man is addressing remain unnamed (just as de Man, himself, does.) This returns to the fact that de Man is naming a crisis that exists to him only ostensibly. The more profound crisis is whether criticism, once scrutinized, retains any meaning.

Historicity becomes a method whereby de Man, rather than making claims for criticism, sees the cycle of crises and purposes that defines any kind of literary creation. The final question as to the ultimate validity or non-validity of criticism is never addressed directly, but merely suggested. This suggestion constitutes a substantial part of de Man's purpose, just as his contemporaries neglect of the question forms part of the crisis.

Wordsworth's approach to historicity, like most angles of his approach, is more direct, less convoluted than de Man's. Wordsworth is a poet, concerned with poetry; when he looks for analogues, in the context of a discussion of metrical language, he thinks of "the age of Catullus, Terence, and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope."(77) What we have here is a variety of implicit assumptions, none of which can be found in de Man. Wordsworth seemingly believes that poetry is an art-form valid both through history and in his present; that there is a stable canon of great work that can be relied upon unquestioningly; that knowledge of this canon is essential; and that Wordsworth, himself, is going to attempt to join the ranks of canonized, historically important poets. Wordsworth's tremendous advantage over de Man, in making a purpose-statement, is that he does not have to resort to subversion, irony, and self-contradiction. On the other hand, his straightforward subjectivity leaves him open to accusations of pomposity and complacency.

There is, in fact, a note of complacency running through Wordsworth's preface. He idealizes the poet as a being "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind."(81) This attitude aids and abets Wordsworth in delivering the purposive element of his preface; he believes in the "poet", as an idealized figure, in the same manner that he believes in "poetry". Thus, he seems to suffer comparatively little cognitive dissonance regarding his agenda, and his ability to express himself and his purpose. His faith in the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind"(80) gives his address assurance, and his tone rarely wavers from this measured, assured calm. When "crisis" issues arise, i.e. when Wordsworth mentions his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, he does not slip into another register, but maintains a dignified, even keel. We are able to infer from this that if a "battle" of sorts should take place for domination of British poetics, Wordsworth is confident of victory. Wordsworth sees a crisis all around him, and is able to name the crisis, and talk of how it must be overcome, but it does not seem to concern him overmuch. His

tone is that of an already privately established eminence waiting to be crowned with conventionally-earned laurel. He sees his isolation as a temporary condition and waits without haste for the world to come to him.

Circumstances, of course, proved Wordsworth to be correct. His eminence grew to be widely recognized, he was eventually made laureate, his avowed purpose was embraced by many poets, and the poetic crisis of “false refinement” and “arbitrary innovation”⁽⁷⁹⁾ resolved itself in the birth of British Romanticism. Consequently, a certain amount of complacency might have been justified. However, it could be argued that a lack of rigor makes many of Wordsworth’s claims untenable. Coleridge, for example, was disturbed by Wordsworth’s claim to the “real language of men”, “real language” not being definable or discussable by any objective measure. Such claims formed an essential part of Wordsworth’s purpose— to stake a claim for poetry as universal truth, “carried alive into the heart by passion.”⁽⁸²⁾ The sort of rigorous and unstinting self-scrutiny advocated by de Man is not part of Wordsworth’s agenda. It may be that, as this preface was not his idea, but that of his friends who “advised me to prefix a systematic defense”⁽⁷⁶⁾, he did not feel the need to question himself, as he might have were it a poem.

De Man, unburdened (at least on the surface) with complacency or egotism, makes no claims for criticism, universal or personal. His purpose, discernible beneath the twists, turns, ironies and meta-ironies, is to stake a claim for self-scrutiny, on all levels. Following in the footsteps of Mallarme, who is seen to be “ironical”⁽¹⁶⁾, de Man suggests that the act of writing must question itself at every turn; “all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis.”⁽⁸⁾ Yet, de Man takes another detour, to an unlikely destination. He uses a lecture by Husserl to demonstrate that “the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Though never explicitly stated, we can use these two statements to make an inductive leap; if all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis, and if the rhetoric of crisis states its own truth in the mode of error, then all true (and rhetorically based) criticism must be erroneous! It must be noted that this inductive leap is never made by de Man himself. It is left in wait for the attentive reader. The irony is that this passionate plea for self-scrutiny in criticism should suggest (albeit indirectly) that criticism, once scrutinized, may lose all meaning.

Had Wordsworth wanted to make this point, he would have spelled it out explicitly. However, the context that de Man is working in precludes him from doing this. For the Deconstructionists, Romanticism, of which Wordsworth is so salient a representative, was the enemy. Any hint of egotism or complacency would be pounced upon and used to discredit the subject. Yet, it was clearly de Man’s

intention to make this point, by whatever means available. He notes that “in the language of polemics the crooked path often travels faster than the straight one.”(14) This must, of necessity, be the path he takes. Because it is not stated overtly, de Man must hope that his audience is subtle enough to catch the purpose behind his twists and turns. Likewise, de Man must hope that his enemies, those who have created the crisis we encounter at the beginning of the piece, and who are never openly named, will appreciate the self-scrutiny that has led de Man to his rigorous conclusion; that nothing in literature can be taken for granted, and that literature itself might be a kind of nothingness.

Here, we have two apparently simple designations: Wordsworth, the Romantic egotist, spelling out a personal purpose and reacting to crisis in a personal way; de Man, the objective Deconstructionist, subsuming subjectivity both in stating a purpose and reacting to a crisis. However, beneath the surface, things may not be so simple. Wordsworth, reacting as he is against objective modes of creation that (he feels) have grown stale, is using bare subjectivity to spell out a new vision. Subjectivity becomes the most attractive expedient, the shortest distance between what was and what may be. It is being purposefully used, and with self-consciousness. Complacency creeps in specifically because Wordsworth knows himself to be doing something original. Had Wordsworth’s ego been subsumed, his entire construct would collapse, and he would not be making an original statement. His crisis would remain untouched, his purpose unstated. In the contextual framework of early nineteenth century Britain, nothing could have been more revolutionary or revelatory than a lone, rebellious subject taking a bold stand against trends that had prevailed for decades.

Likewise, De Man’s lack of subjectivity, his apparent objectivity, is a carefully crafted illusion. De Man speaks of using the language of polemics, because *Criticism and Crisis* is polemical. It is a personal statement based on a subjective experience, both of criticism as a personal, purposive endeavor, and of criticism as it exists in de Man’s social milieu. This milieu is being dogged by crisis, and a crisis (of false refinement and arbitrary innovation) that closely resembles the one that Wordsworth is enumerating in his preface. Because de Man is not self-consciously inaugurating a new era but reacting against one, his strategy seems to be to outdo the Continental critics at their own game. His “I” is so cleverly concealed that, far from seeming like a “privileged consciousness”(9), it seems evanescent. Yet multiple re-readings of *Criticism and Crisis* reveal an “I” that is fluid, mercurial, and capable both of enumerating a two-pronged crisis (the fickleness of Continental critics and the uncertainty of criticism as a discipline) and stating a two-pronged purpose (to show that fickleness in criticism is fruitless and to show equally the need for continued self-scrutiny). In a way, de Man’s circuitous technique could be seen as even more

egotistical than Wordsworth's. There is an element of dazzle to de Man's performance that is lacking in Wordsworth. De Man demonstrates that he can use irony, mirroring, and deliberate self-contradiction to craft a statement that is as essentially personal as Wordsworth's preface. He is beating the Continental critics at their own "unprivileged" game, demystifying them in such a way that at no point does he reveal himself as the dreaded, Romantic subject. Yet every point he makes moves forward the argument that it is not the Romantic subject to be guarded against, but a contradictory awareness of literature as a "something that is really nothing". De Man might choose to designate literature as a "nothing that may or may not be something".

There does remain one fundamental discrepancy between Wordsworth and de Man: their attitude towards language itself. This discrepancy was largely determined by the eras in which they lived; Wordsworth, right at the dawn of Romanticism, had no notion of words as arbitrary signs, nor that the connection between thing and word, signified and signifier, might be flawed or, worse, non-existent. When Wordsworth addresses language itself, he does so in such a way to reinforce the impression that he believes words are capable of "pure" signification. Wordsworth mentions "in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other"(76-77), in the context of a complaint as to the general taste of the British public. We do not see Wordsworth questioning the inherent value of linguistic signification; we see him questioning the uses to which linguistic signification can be put. If language is seen to be stable, reliable, and just to the expressive intent of the human subject, then an attitude of confident self-righteousness would seem to be, if not admirable, at least understandable. Wordsworth does not doubt that he can make clear his purposive agenda, nor that he can spell out the crisis in British taste as he sees it. His trust in language, and in his own expressive capacities, seems secure. For Wordsworth, language may be purified and simplified by a retreat into rural simplicity; the language of rural people "is adopted... because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived."(78) Rather than admit of fundamental dualities or confusions, Wordsworth advocates reducing language to its bare essentials. Here, there is likely to be less static between sign and meaning, less needless ornamentation. This simplification of language forms part of Wordsworth's purpose, just as the ornate, "gaudy" language of his predecessors forms part of the perceived crisis he is counteracting. Once simplified, language need not be scrutinized. This bedrock belief in the power and reliability of signification is part of what allows Wordsworth to be so straightforward. Purpose and crisis can be equally addressed, an even keel may be maintained, and faith in the ultimate triumph of truth and nature (both, in this context, assumed

universals) are demonstrated. Wordsworth enacts the discourse of the privileged subject, making a singular claim for his finite notions of truth, in precisely the manner that de Man eschews.

For de Man, things must be more complicated. In the post-Saussurian era, faith in language, even simplified language, had been drastically reduced. The arbitrary quality of the linguistic sign had become a guiding precept for both Structuralism and Deconstructionism. De Man works with the knowledge that every discourse falls prey to “the duplicity, the confusion, and the untruth that we take for granted in the everyday use of language.”(9) The kind of self-scrutiny that de Man is advocating would seem to preclude the confident vigor of Wordsworth’s tone and literary demeanor. De Man’s complete awareness, both of his own situation as a contemporary critic and of the situation of his Continental colleagues, allows him room to maneuver, to use the trends and tenor of his times to make a personal claim on, if not universal truth, at least enduring value. Whether there is a direct correlation between universal truth (the legitimacy of which took a beating, alongside linguistic signage, as the Structuralist movement developed) and enduring value is not, for de Man, the point. What de Man is demonstrating, with just as much confidence and vigor as Wordsworth (though sans the “I”, and the directness that it lends), is that certain situations and circumstances tend to repeat themselves, that trends pass, and that the self-scrutiny which “scrutinize(s) itself to the point of reflecting on its own origin”(7) has a value. De Man does not posit this value as universal; he does not need to. The very fact of Mallarme’s speech to an English audience at Oxford in 1894, the nature of Mallarme’s ironies, his twists, turns, and ability to turn trends and fickleness to his own ends in a sort of charade, show de Man (and, by implication, his readers) that Nietzsche’s “eternal return” might apply to aesthetics as to all other things. The end of Mallarme’s charade is adopted by de Man; to sneak “enduring value” (for want of a better, less authoritative sounding term) in through the back door, via irony. Through adopting Mallarme’s stance, de Man gets to have his cake and eat it too; he makes a personal purpose-statement without ever using the first person, while revealing a seeming crisis to be a trifle (and one with many antecedents in the history of literature.) Mallarme becomes a Virgil figure (albeit a highly ironical one), leading de Man through the dark wood of conflict, into the open air of disciplined thought.

As this “air of disciplined thought” entails a fundamental ambivalence or uncertainty towards de Man’s chosen discipline, this metaphor might be misleading. Better, perhaps, to say that de Man’s Mallarmean mask allows him to tell the truth (or, at least, his version of the truth). Wordsworth does not feel compelled to wear a mask. His only artifice involves the use of rhetoric to make his perceived crisis clear and his purpose known. His famous “all good poetry is

the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"(79) seems more rhetorical than reality based. "All", in this context, universalizes a sentiment that, in its time, might have seemed shocking. It would be difficult to imagine *Paradise Lost* as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", or *The Rape of the Lock*. Wordsworth exaggerates the aspects of his argument that make him seem singular, atomized, and extraordinary. The exaggerations are subtle, but they color the entire enterprise of the preface.

Perhaps this is the essential similarity between Wordsworth and de Man, as reflected in these two pieces: both feel the need to make calculated overstatements. De Man's "all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis" is mirrored by Wordsworth's "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." These two pieces are joined, not only by the need to assert a purpose and a crisis, but by the ambition to be bold, to think big. These are pieces written to be read. They demonstrate a keen awareness of an assumed audience, and both display a sense of intellectual showmanship, a certain bravura quality. These two figures, writing to such different ends and audiences in such radically dissimilar eras, are showing us (one through earnestness, one through irony) how a literary gauntlet might be laid down. Judging by the intense reaction these pieces received, de Man and Wordsworth both succeeded at meeting their divergent, contradictory, but not entirely dissimilar goals.

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Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Bob Perelman (Philadelphia, USA), Adam Fiedel (Philadelphia, USA)

AF: I was very touched by the intimacy and playfulness of the poems in *Playing Bodies*. The poems are all written in a unique, spare, lyrical voice. Could you talk a little bit about how this voice developed?

BP: I feel like I did something I hadn't done before in that book, and I was really very knocked out by Francie [Shaw]'s paintings. For a couple of years before I wrote the poems, I'd been thinking of trying to do a collaboration with her based on those paintings. We had collaborated in the past. I was very involved in the production of the paintings, in that I would see each one that she was doing, we would talk about which postures worked best. For a few of them I made suggestions (like, turn this guy upside down, etc.) I'm not claiming much credit for the paintings, just to say that I was engrossed, as she was making them. So I'd been thinking about, how would I write poems of or for those paintings, and I tried quite a bit. At first I tried to imitate them formally in some way. The canvases are square, so I tried to write square poems— four quatrains of four word lines, and I think I even (one or two times) arranged them in two columns, really trying to make them square like the paintings. I wasn't terribly happy with the result. Then I concentrated on a more emotional level, and the paintings made me feel all sorts of things— scenarios, moods, tones of voice. I would show my attempts to Francie, and she often told me I was seeing only half of the painting. She was clear that the two figures were one gesture or mood or state of mind. She wanted to make sure I tried to get those complexities into the poems, and that helped me turn the corner. At some point, I really started to allow myself to say emotionally complicated, contradictory things. I opened up to the spirit of the paintings. Once I got onto that frequency, things went much faster, and I'd often write a couple a day, after working for more than a year on trying to approach them. Once they were written, I tried to cut things way down. That was getting back to the original impulse— to imitate the paintings' formality. The paintings are incredibly compact, so I had to make the poems as compact as I could. That was something new for me— writing short poems.

AF: Talking about models— as I was reading *Playing Bodies*, I often thought of e.e. cummings. Was he in there somewhere?

BP: It may not be fair, but cummings has been on my shit list for decades. I liked him a lot when I was young. He was one of the first poets I ever liked, so I suppose possibly he's influenced me subconsciously. I have problems with his sentimentality and his anti-Semitism. I cut Pound incredible slack because I understand the mechanics of his anti-Semitism. For some reason I don't cut cummings any slack at all. He rubs me the wrong way.

AF: You write, "Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for/ decades..." It seems that in many poems, "Confession" here quoted being the most obvious example, you try and balance the post-modernist's rejection of confession and the Romantic's penchant for same. Do you think this is relevant or applicable? If so, would you like to talk a little bit about this binary and the tensions it creates in your writing? Is there, perhaps, a kinship with John Ashbery lurking around this territory for you?

BP: I know that I was being (on the surface) sarcastic, transgressive, contrary in writing that poem. It was the sly thought of adopting a so-called alien perspective, naive alienation. The "slimier-than-thou-aestheticians" are the indirect result of my having taken my boys to see *Independence Day*, where the aliens are decidedly slimy.

AF: You've made it clear that, as a poet, you try and avoid "elemental words." Could you discuss elemental words? Does elemental merely mean overused or trite, or is there something more subtle being denoted?

BP: Elemental words are essentializing words, words that are meant to be deeper than language— often geo-political racial stuff, i.e. "American," etc. "I am American and you're not." It's transcendental tags that get used all the time. For me, making poetry lively and healthy involves teasing and tweaking, challenging the notion of the poetic, not being worshipful. So "elemental" in unchangeable— you're not allowed to change it. I didn't think of that way of saying it— "elemental"— until I was writing the introduction to *Ten to One*. "Elemental" isn't an elemental word for me.

AF: You're quoted as saying, "poets most usefully exist in hearing the variety of society's speech and responding to that variety." I was wondering if you could explore this a little bit— what, for you, is the richest societal domain a poet can mine— streets, bars, universities?

BP: All of the above, I suppose. As many as possible, although you have to do a lot of translating sometimes. Putting different language universes in touch with each is a basic necessity these days. There has to be the barest hint of a hinge between one side of a language universe and another. The world of books is not unpoetic and the street is not unpoetic, and if I use bookish words, I try to make a hinge or an articulation so that you know what I'm talking about. If it's too explanatory then it gets very cumbersome, but I think there's a value in doing it if you can do it deftly, and it can be a real source of strength.

AF: In your poem "Days," you write, "Some days you skip/ Come back to them/ Later, others never occur." In a compressed way, these lines seem to posit a sort of Proustian view of time. I often get that feeling from your poems— of time being

essentially elusive, untraceable. The poems, then, are an attempt at tracing how time-parts fit together. Is there any truth in this reading?

BP: That seems like a good description. It is something I think about all the time—the present moment of writing. It strikes me that poetry, though not ephemeral, is thrown into the present more so than other activities. It's the most old-fashioned art. Again, it's a tricky balance, a question of deftness. I have a prejudice against "poetic piety."

AF: I noticed that the Ezra Pound segment of *The Trouble With Genius* seemed very deeply felt. Is there a sense of deep affinity with Pound? Does this affinity make it difficult to face his sketchy-at-best politics?

BP: Pound was one of the crucial poets in the dawning of my interest in poetry. Somehow, I got hold of *ABC of Reading* when I was a kid. It made poetry seem very doable and fascinating, like, "what could be more interesting than this?" I came to poetic consciousness at the tail end of the New American Poetry world, and that's a "New Directions" world, all of Pound's work coming out of New Directions. It's a sanitary presentation of Pound. It was possible to read him and not get that he's a Fascist or an anti-Semite. You can read right past it and you can see he's being irascible, and you're never quite sure what or who he's irascible at, and the systematic nature of his prejudices doesn't show up. I realized at a certain point that it organized his thinking, anti-Semitism. When Pound came to London—Ezra is a very Jewish name, and he had red hair—he was always telling people, "I'm not Jewish, I'm not Jewish." It became very important to me to figure out what was going on with Pound, because he instigated (that's his word, ultimately) much of what was important to me personally and to most American poetry.

AF: Do you ever suffer spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry and art in general? Is the Samuel Beckett syndrome ("I can't go on, I'll go on") once that you can empathize with?

BP: Yes, I certainly suffer spasms of doubt. I don't have spasms of doubt about the importance of poetry: there, I am a true believer. I suffer spasms of doubt about my own poetry. I'm not a happy camper when a poem isn't finished. I remind myself that I have written stuff that I like.

AF: Lately I've been messing around with the concept *rhetopoeia*. This, for me, is the rhetorical impact of any given poem, how it convinces us of its own substantiality. Do you think poems need this sort of justification? Does a poem need to convince us, on a rhetorical level, that it is somehow necessary or justified in its existence?

BP: I'm suspicious of generalizations. I've used the word "rhetoric" a bunch— rhetoric as a source of poetic power. But it's one of the easiest words to misunderstand. Rhetoric is also a synonym of "bullshit!" But rhetoric in the old sense— structures used in addressing a single person, or a group of people, or a situation, when that's what rhetoric means— remains crucial. The environments in which poems exist are so complicated and fast moving that sometimes when every poem is "convincing us of its own substantiality," it feels like endless playings of the authenticity card. Like in "Confession": "Come on and read me for the inner you I've locked onto with my cultural capital sensing-device looks...") Sometimes the best rhetoric (in the sense that I think you're using it) is not worrying about rhetoric. But poems never escape the environment of reading and writing. So, no final answer to the question.

originally published in Rain Taxi, Vol. 10 No. 3, 2005



Orbitz Coupon Codes

Blog Information Profile for afield

P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Adam Fieled (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, USA): "Undulant"

I'd made plans to meet you in Bar Noir
on 18th, you were there; we drank. What
happened after that, in the Logan Square
flat, is that in defrocking you knocked over
an antique lamp bequeathed to me by my
aunt in Mahopac. Serendipity, I thought,
stunned then into silence by your bedroom
elan. Outside, a sultry night simmered; this
night of all nights, scattered green glass littered
my bedroom floor, & I finally got taken, past
liquor, to what eternity was only in your mouth—
as though you'd jumped from a forest scene
(ferns, redwoods), a world of pagan magic,
into a scene still undulant with possibilities—

c. Adam Fieled 2017-2023

Undulant first appeared in *Monday Journal* (Issue #2) in 2021

Vlad Pogorelov (Rocklin, California, USA): "No. 33"

Mosquitoes,
Cockroaches, and
Spiders
My lovely roommates
and my only true friends

Editor:

- Adam Fieled

Artist Posts

- Adam Fieled (editor, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, USA): "Undulant"
- Vlad Pogorelov (Rocklin, California, USA): "No. 33"
- Symbolists and Hallucinogenics on FM (Fieled's Mis...
- Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA): from blackb...
- Andrew Lundwall (Rockford, Illinois, USA): Two Poems
- Chris McCabe (London, UK): Two Poems
- Adam Fieled (editor, Philadelphia, USA): from PICC...
- Otoliths 44-70: issue pdfs on NLA/Trove (Australia)
- Argotist Online Poetry, Equations on PennSound, et...
- Brian Kim Stefans (Los Angeles, USA): "White Sestina"

Contributors

- Adam Fieled



Archives

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I love you
I love you
I love you
In a sick kind of love
Which will make an executioner happy
And the victim will suffer no more
Only pleasure from the torture
And the pain has no right to exist

And some time my eyes are
Staring at you: big, lonely spider
You are sitting in the darkest corner
Of your dusty net
Waiting for me to get in

And I know for sure
That a giant mosquito
Made his home
Inside my swollen heart
There is plenty of blood
Inside those chambers

And when I can't hear you clearly,
When you are talking to me on the phone
I feel that a cockroach is moving
Inside of my ear

And sometimes I feel
That there is nothing to feel anymore
Ever since my soul was amputated
And smuggled to India
By a gynecologist
Who was seeing my mother
Long time ago, before I was born

So,
Mosquitoes,
Cockroaches,
and Spiders,
You are my only friends,
Who are sharing my soulless fate,
Abandoned by lovers,

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Forgotten by long-time friends,
Forsaken by my motherland and the ancient gods
I am living a sheltered life
As a derelict

And it seems like it's time
To jump into the water of a substance,
Which looks like a residential street
Or a boiling sea
Depends on the point of view
Or the angle of the mind
Or just walk out the door
And swim to the store...
Buy some cheap liquor...
Go back home...
To this slow SINKING ship
And to share my fate
With my only true friends
With my only true love
With mosquitoes,
cockroaches,
and spiders
'Cause I am a derelict
And I am living a sheltered life

c. Vladlen Pogorelov 1997-2023

Symbolists and Hallucinogenics on FM (Fiedel's Miscellaneous)

Some interesting damage being done by a travelogue piece covering my years in State College, Pennsylvania, in the 90s. Parts 1 and 2.

Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA): from *blackbirds*

not good at much,
great

at being
forgotten, though

the Big Ugly Tarp flaps
outside the window,
forgotten, though

cockroaches stagger out,
die on the carpet, their
eggs, however, travel home
with me, jewelry for my wife

many folks
die for voices

that's why Emily
was smart, shut
her voice in drawers
near ghostly knickers
there the larynx
won't lie
too cramped

this enough of shouting

.....

my pre-arthritic hands strangle
Disillusioned and Disruptive Students

as snow melts to re-fall
the Big Ugly Tarp becomes
my blanket, I sleep
on the roof and use books
to kindle my life-saving fire
the smell of stagnant water
dances with my nose hairs

the drone of traffic sounds
my imaginary wolfpack
gets shot not forgotten

the Terrible Angel
slithers into Theology

the true Big Ugly Tarp,
Class while the Rabbi
drowses drunk before
noon, did you hear
the one about

I think so, but I've forgotten

dump out wheelchairs in dumpsters for miracles,
shout "rise and walk," with a grating voice for veterans,
'twas enough to suffer, thrown from the steed

six legs crawl
over a half-dozen
forgotten spoons,
night is coming
again, at last;
so are cockroaches.

© Steve Halle 2008-2023

Andrew Lundwall (Rockford, Illinois, USA): Two Poems

I SWEAR

I am writing down numbers
There's a look in your eyes
That screams *Moscow, bitches!*

You've pinned God to the ottoman
Like a crushed mosquito elsewhere
Munching, the kids play dominoes quietly

Pretend to give a fuck, I dare you
I swear once I published in this literary quarterly...
& start to hold my breath & think virgin again

Dear brethren and sistren infatuated with irony
I swear the depth of this bread goes on forever
While a good portion of the world is starving

The balls of this poem are sagging south
I've stopped making plans expecting her call
I can't sit through movies at all anymore

MANGINA

My mangina is the screw
By which you thread
Your not so secret nights

Don't bother my beer
I'm drinking

© Andrew Lundwall 2008-2023

Chris McCabe (London, UK): Two Poems

LONDON EYE

Nature: an extinction rate.
Recall she was a girl
Speaking with a bullet in *Budavox*,

Shells on the sea blasting,
On Frith Street, where, in 1914,
Imagism flicked on. Then,

There (!) the pseudo-Blitz
Of television began, 1929.
I wear the soft black cloth

Of the bathrobe you gave me, swan
On the foam of your rising.
No home for creatures with the sun

Dialing its metronome
Onto the cool ridge's melted dome,
To kiss and caress, honey, by-gone.

QUARTER TO FIVE

Grief's a winter gulag—
growing gardenless in rain—
cardinals that cannot vote—
the air damp infected corduroy—
this bone tundra

implanted under the cranial flap
like a loveless rose petal:
slow white slime-worms
risen to bury
dim flesh in you.

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[Blog Information](#) [Profile for afieled](#)

P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Adam Field (editor, Philadelphia, USA): from PICC (*A Poet in Center City*) "#34" Editor:
• Adam Field

Not all of the Highwire Free School shows were big ones. We would do series of modest shows between the larger shows. The Bats were an all-girl band we wanted Artist Posts to book, so we did. John and I did a bunch of schmooze routines with them, at Tritone and elsewhere, and John and I were both in love with Tobi Simon, an old friend of Trish's and mine who played keyboards (and also painted). Tobi was tiny, an elf, with exquisite bone-structure in her face, chestnut hair, and bright blue eyes. Of the Bats, she was the most natural as a Free School person. I would later ascertain that by this time, Tobi was living a day-to-day life not unlike Christopher's. The paintings she was producing, a median blend of French Neo-Classical influence picked up at PAFA and queer girl East Coast-ism, were so powerfully formal and thematically expressive at the same time that I became amazed she could leave her flat at all without barfing. The irony was that the Bats were not unsuccessful— they were in the Philly press semi-constantly, with Tobi prominently featured, cheekbones and all. The scenesters who knew her as a rock star had no idea she even painted.. And while she wasn't just what I would call a bisexual tart, her intense, full-lipped, fine-featured magnetism was registered by all. By this time, we had a new system

• Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue:
• Rachel Blau DuPlessis...
• Chris McCabe (London, UK):
"Existential Clubbing"
• Miscellaneous E Hits
• Adam Field (editor, Plymouth)
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• Andrew Duncan (Nottingham, UK):
"The Metallic Autumn"
• Valeria Melchiorotto (London, UK):
"Grandmother's ...
• John Siddique (Wigan, UK): "Tree of
the World"
• Mary Walker Graham (Boston, USA):
"Double"
• Mark Young chapbook, Melancholy...
• Adam Field (editor, Plymouth)
Meeting, Pennsylvani...

going at the Highwire, by which the factory room and the main space would be used simultaneously. The night the Bats played, we had poets reading on a raised dais in

the factory room. The factory room had high ceilings, but was darker, danker, and more private than the main space— a perfect place to smoke up or hook up. The

poets were Temple kids, and one stuck out for us immediately, especially to John; a

buxom, olive-skinned Latino named Lena. If I sensed that I would beat John to Tobi,

he would certainly beat me to Lena, who liked his looseness over my rigor.

Archives
Christopher and I were attempting to perfect a new way of combining poetry with

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eventually other artists would show up, on the East Coast or wherever, and be influenced to try what we'd tried, to experiment in the ways that we were experimenting. Nobody in art can really condone the Layaway Plan patrol intermittently part of, but it's a fact of cultural life. Deal with it. Headed towards 2005, John's characteristic looseness was the keynote mood. Even if it meant that Christopher and I had to up the ante to six drinks per night out.

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Otoliths 44-70: issue pdfs on NLA/Trove (Australia)

The National Library of Australia's Trove initiative has amassed a collection of issue pdfs for Mark Young's Otoliths site, beginning with issue 44 (2017) and culminating in this year's issue 70, which is to be the journal's final issue. Enjoy.

Blog Information Profile for afieled

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P.F.S. POST

PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

Argotist Online Poetry, *Equations* on PennSound, etc. (UK, USA)

From two-time P.F.S. Post contributor and Argotist Online editor Jeffrey Side: a new online poetry journal which extends the reach of AO: Argotist Online Poetry. Also, a new Argotist Online site for Argotist online e-books, and an archive resource for Argotist Online with UK WA.

Equations, by P.F.S. Post editor Adam Fieled, in its entirety in two parts on PennSound: 1 and 2.

"Grandmother's ...

- John Siddique (Wigan, UK): "Tree of the World"
- Mary Walker Graham (Boston, USA): "Double"
- Mark Young chapbook, Melancholy...
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